Among the paintings by John Singleton Copley shown at the Museum in 1936 and 1937, in the exhibition honoring the two-hundredth anniversary of his birth, were several painted after he had left America. These, lent by English collections, included two ambitious historical works, the Death of the Earl of Chatham and the Death of Major Pierson, and the wholly delightful Three Princesses, as well as sketches for two other large compositions. They were quite an eye opener to those who knew only the solid and sober portraits of Copley’s American period. This year the Museum has acquired nine drawings that were preparatory studies for the Death of the Earl of Chatham.

When Copley left Boston in 1774 his plan was to study old masters in London and Europe and return to America. However, by the time he was well into his work in Italy, the Revolutionary War had made Boston unsafe for his wife and children, and he urged them to join him in London. Before the war ended Copley had made enough of a success as a painter in London to decide to stay on rather than risk the uncertainties of life in the new republic.

It was the fashion of the period to paint large historical scenes illustrating events of recent or current times. Copley’s first venture in this field was Watson and the Shark, a graphic portrayal of the misadventure of Brook Watson, a man politically prominent in London, who in his youth had tangled with a shark and lost a leg. The painting caused a great deal of comment in the Royal Academy exhibition of 1778 and launched the artist on a big project of more immediate interest, the Death of the Earl of Chatham.

On April 7, 1778, William Pitt, Earl of Chatham, made his last speech in the House of Lords, protesting the severance of the American colonies from Britain. He collapsed at the end of the speech and died a few weeks later. The following year Copley started the ten-foot canvas illustrating this dramatic scene. The fact that he was able to get so many noble lords to pose for him and finish the picture by 1780 speaks well for his industry and his standing as an artist. The eleven heads we have are mainly for the men crowding around the prostrate Chatham. Near the center is Charles Pratt, Baron Camden, and beside him Richard Brocklesby, the physician; the Duke of Portland holds Chatham’s head; in the background, with his arm upraised, is Thomas Howard, Earl of Effingham, and behind him is a trio drawn on one sheet, the Earl of Coventry, the Earl of Devon, and the Duke of Manchester. To the left of the center is the standing figure of John, Viscount Dudley and Ward. Even more noticeable in the scene is the Earl of Mansfield, who remained
Drawings by Copley for his painting of the death of William Pitt the elder, Lord Chatham, illustrated on page 125. LEFT: Charles Pratt, Baron Camden, lifelong friend of Chatham, who stands near the center of the painting, on the edge of a group of figures in the background. RIGHT: William Henry Cavendish-Bentinck, Duke of Portland, whose head is just above Chatham’s in the painting. Both these men were in sympathy with Chatham’s policy of conciliating the American colonies. Between them in the painting are Lord Mahon, Chatham’s son-in-law, William Pitt the younger (with hands raised), and his two brothers.
Drawings by Copley for the painting opposite. LEFT: William Murray, Earl of Mansfield, seated at the left in the painting. Mansfield, Lord Chief Justice 1756–1788, was an opponent of Chatham's policies and his great rival in oratory. RIGHT: the Earls of Coventry and Devon and the Duke of Manchester. They are at the top of the background group beyond Chatham. The figures in the left foreground are Lord Gower, Lord Sandwich, Lord Amherst, Lord Dartmouth, and Viscount Dudley and Ward. Behind them is Earl Bathurst, the Lord Chancellor and Speaker, wearing his hat. A sketch for Bathurst is in the Boston Museum.
The Death of the Earl of Chatham, after a speech in answer to the Duke of Richmond, by John Singleton Copley (1737–1815). The scene is the Painted Chamber in the old Palace of Westminster. Richmond stands in the right foreground. In the House of Lords; the Tate Gallery collection.
seated during the episode and was severely criticized afterward for his lack of feeling. His is the strongest drawing in our group. John Hinchcliffe, Bishop of Peterborough, stands at the extreme left. Hinchcliffe was Chancellor of Trinity College, Cambridge, until his liberal opinions offended the government. In the background, beneath the canopy, the fifth man from the right is Frederick, Lord North, who was George III's minister during the American Revolution.

The drawings, in black and red chalk, are carefully and solidly drawn and resemble in their incisiveness Copley's oil portraits rather than his pastels. The scale is the same as in the painting, and the drawings must have been final studies, although not squared for transfer. They were varnished and separately framed as ovals at some time before 1932, when they were sold with the collection of Lord Aberdare, Copley's great-great-grandson, having come directly from the painter through his son, Lord Lyndhurst.

Only a scant hundred of Copley's working drawings appear to have survived to the present time. Whatever sketches he left behind at his Beacon Hill farm must have been destroyed by the British troops who were quartered there, or by the buyer of the property soon after the war. Copley's English collection stayed in his George Street house in London until the death of his son, but there were no drawings listed in the Lyndhurst sale of 1864. Some drawings are now in the Robert Witt Library in London, in the Karolik collection of the Boston Museum, and in the Detroit Institute of Arts, and a group were exhibited by Harry Shaw Newman in 1947. Most of these are action sketches for the large historical paintings—Watson and the Shark, the Death of Major Pierson, and the Death of the Earl of Chatham. There are a few preliminary sketches of the heads in our group, but none in this precise, detailed form that transforms them from working drawings into small portraits.

LEFT: Lord North, Prime Minister 1770–1782 and agent of George III in prosecuting the war with the Colonies. In the painting he appears in the back row on the left. RIGHT: Richard Brocklesby, physician, shown between Lord Camden and William Pitt the younger. Brocklesby was a Quaker and a friend of Burke and Dr. Johnson.