A Copley Primitive

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As the recent gift of Mrs. Orme Wilson the Museum has received a picture that has a decidedly curious significance in the history of early American painting. It is a work of the utmost rarity, a painting which in a strange way adumbrates the exfoliation of one of the most potent talents ever to appear in American art—John Singleton Copley. This painting (Figure 1) is one of his juvenile works—a genuine early American primitive—probably painted before 1754, and it may well be the earliest painting from his hand to come down to us. It was purchased from Copley by Jonathan Simpson before Copley left Boston for London. From Mr. Simpson it passed to his daughter who bequeathed it to her cousins in the Borland family.

The picture is described in the privately printed book, Sketch of the Life and List of Some of the Works of John Singleton Copley by Augustus T. Perkins, published in Boston in 1873, in which the description reads in part as follows:

NEPTUNE
This is an allegorical picture, forty-four inches long by twenty-seven wide, representing the god, who holds a trident in his right hand, and a globe in his left. . . . This picture was in the possession of Miss Simpson of Boston, who inherited it from her father, Jonathan Simpson . . . . There was another smaller picture of the same subject, reversed in position, in the possession of Mrs. C. B. Raymond, Boston.

The present location of Mrs. Raymond’s picture is unknown. Our picture remained in the Borland family until Mrs. Wilson presented it to the Museum in memory of her parents, Mr. and Mrs. J. Nelson Borland.

Let us hope that Mr. Simpson purchased the picture not so much because of its artistic qualities but rather to aid a promising young fellow townsman who had the courage to aspire to rise from provincial Boston in the pursuit of art. This earliest patron of Copley’s must also be remembered as one of the first of a long line of American art collectors who were prepared to offer support to the artists of their own time with cash and praise. The painting, though executed with a degree of competence, nevertheless has about it an earnest awkward air that proclaims the novice hand of the young copyist. Perhaps it was painted under the tutelage of Copley’s stepfather Peter Pelham, the painter and engraver who encouraged him to study the art of painting.

Three of Copley’s earliest works that have survived to the present are mythological subjects: our Return of Neptune; a Galatea (Figure 4) in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, believed to have been painted about 1754; and a Mars, Venus, and Vulcan now in a private collection. Of these three pictures it is almost certain that the Neptune is the earliest because of its stark unsweetened American primitive style. The other pictures are softer and prettier and vaguely Italianate, perhaps pseudosophisticate in manner.

The subject is one of those stock clichés of Italian painting—a Triumph of Neptune. Here the god of the sea, a bearded old man, is seen gliding over the waves of his watery domain in a triumphal shallop drawn by a quadriga of sea horses. Neptune is attended by mermaids and tritons and marine amorini all bearing the proper attributes—kelp, conch, trident, globe, and crown—or at the very least, as in the case of the mermaids, wearing suitable expressions of satisfaction and marine prepotency if nothing else. One triton is winding a blast of foghorn notes upon a conch shell to herald the approach of
1. *The Return of Neptune, before 1754,* by John Singleton Copley (1737-1815). Oil on canvas. 27 ½ x 44 ½ inches

*Gift of Mrs. Orme Wilson in memory of Mr. and Mrs. J. Nelson Borland, 59.198*
2. The Return of Neptune, 1749. Engraving by Simon François Ravenet after a design by Andrea Casali (1720-1783). 12 ½ x 20 inches

Elisha Whittelsey Collection, 51.501.4555
mighty Neptune. These classic elements are all composed to make a correct and grandiose if rather trite scheme.

The search for the source of Copley’s composition—for the subject is of course not one that is usually associated with early American painting—turns up a curious bit of history. We know that hundreds of prints and engravings were imported into the American colonies in the eighteenth century and that most if not all artists in those days began their training by copying subjects and compositions from such prints. And this is the case with the painting in hand. The picture of Neptune was copied more or less exactly from an engraving. After some search a copy of this engraving was discovered in the capacious files of the Museum’s Print Department. This print (Figure 2), though it was engraved and proved in London in 1749, was designed by an Italian painter and decorator, Andrea Casali, called the Chevalier. He was a protégé of His Grace the Duke of Montagu, who was, among other things, Master General of His Majesty’s Ordnance. The engraving bears an inscription which furnishes some clues to the ultimate source of Copley’s painting, and the biographical notes on the painter Casali give further clues which lead us to the final solution of the problem.

Andrea Casali was born in Italy at Civitavecchia in 1720. The date of his arrival in England is not known, but in 1748 he was working in London where he painted some of the transparencies that ornamented a tremendous machine for the display of fireworks in celebration of the signing of the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle, which brought to a close the War of the Austrian Succession. He was awarded several prizes by the Society of Arts and painted some decorations for Fonthill Abbey and for Montagu House. About 1766 he returned to Italy and settled in Rome; there he disappears from history.

Casali’s contribution to the huge fireworks
machine erected in St. James's Park consisted of a group of twenty-three symbolic statues—a mixed mythological consortium, among them Fame, Isis, Peace, Neptune, Mars, Justice, Fortitude, Temperance, Prudence, Religion, Constancy, Honor, Jupiter, Diana, and Ceres. He also designed several pictures, which are described as follows in a pamphlet on the fireworks published in 1749: “The Pictures in the Front of the Machine are eighteen, each painted double: They at first appear as Marble Basso Relievos, and after the Firework is played off they are removed by Machinery, and discover Pictures representing the same Subject in Colours, which are rendered transparent by a great Number of Lampions.

“The great Picture over the Cornice in the Center of the Machine is twenty-eight Feet by ten. It represents HIS MAJESTY giving PEACE to BRITANNIA. . . . On the Right of this below the Entablature, is a Picture of fifteen Feet by eight, representing the Return of Neptune. . . . [see Figure 3] Companion to this on the Left of the central Arch, is the Return of Mars. . . . These three were designed by Chevalier Andrea Cassali.”

The Description states “The Machine is situated 500 Feet from his Majesty's Library, and represents a magnificent Doric Temple, from which extend two Wings terminated by Pavillons. . . . This Machine is 114 Feet high . . . and is 410 Feet long. It was invented and designed by the Chevalier Servandoni. . . . The Ornaments of this Machine are all in Relief, and it is adorned with Frets, Gilding, Lustres, Artificial Flowers, Inscriptions, Statues, Allegorial Pictures, &c.”

The “play-off” of the fireworks should have been spectacular, for over 10,000 rockets, 87 air balloons, 136 suns and wheels were set off as well as quantities of “Tourbillons, Pots de Brins, Pots d'Aigrettes, Cascades, Fountains, Gerbes, Lances, and Marrons,” all fired by the Royal Train
of Artillery and the Signori Gaetano Ruggierri and Giuseppe Sarti of Bologna. The whole performance was under the direction of Captain Thomas Desaguliers, Chief Fire Master of His Majesty’s Royal Laboratory. So Copley’s painting then is a copy of an engraving after a theatrical transparency, and the original Return of Neptune was but a temporary decoration designed for only one festival appearance.

The fireworks is amusingly described by Horace Walpole in a letter to Horace Mann, dated May 5, 1749: “The next day there were fireworks, which by no means answered the expense, the length of preparation, and the expectation which had been raised; indeed, for a week before, the town was like a country fair, the streets filled from morning to night, scaffolds building everywhere you could or could not see, and coaches in the Park, and on every house, guards, and the machine itself, which was very beautiful, was all that was worth seeing. The rockets and whatever was thrown up into the air, succeeded mighty well; but the wheels, and all that was to compose the principal part, were pitiful and ill-conducted, with no changes of coloured fires and shapes: the illumination was mean, and lighted so slowly that scarce anybody had patience to wait the finishing and then, what contributed to the awkwardness of the whole, was the right pavilion catching fire and being burnt down in the middle of the show. The King, the Duke, and Princess Emily saw it from the Library. . . . Very little mischief was done and but two persons killed . . . our mob was extremely tranquil.”

By comparing our painting with a copy of the engraving of Neptune itself, one sees immediately how closely and correctly the engraving was copied, and where Copley used his own ideas to modify the picture. The sea horses’ heads for instance look rather blocky and strange in the painting, yet when we compare them with the engraving we find that this blockiness is not the result of the young artist’s inept drawing, but rather of his copying exactly the forms as the engraver showed them. The “expression” of these sea creatures (if sea horses may be said to have “expression” on their faces) reappears many years later as a trace or reminiscence in the horses’ heads in some of Copley’s paintings of equestrian generals.

The elements that Copley modified to suit himself, and the effect of the oil medium in which he worked, is revealed in the color, which was presumably not indicated on the engraving. Copley supplied a horizon and left out here and there one or two touches that were unclear in the engraving. His main contribution, however, was in the color, and in some strange way it is, even at this early stage, typical of much of his later work. It is as though his color sense was from the beginning already well developed, completely individual, and instinctively “right.”

This extraordinary relic of Copley’s youth takes its place among the many superb mature works from his hand now in the Museum’s collection. Though the Neptune cannot ever be considered as one of Copley’s masterpieces, it will nevertheless always stand as a touching memento of the artist’s youth and will retain its historical value as one of his earliest student exercises.
4. *Galatea*, about 1754, by John Singleton Copley. Oil on canvas. 37 x 52 inches

*Museum of Fine Arts, Boston*