

John Singleton Copley

FOR YOUR CLASSROOM

CLASSROOM CONNECTION

1. Have students design a portrait of themselves as they would like to be seen by others. The portrait should include symbols that represent aspects of their personality.

2. As an extension, have students craft a written narrative that explains the meaning behind the symbolic elements contained in their portrait, and how those elements contribute to their representation.

Frances Deering Wentworth, wife of Theodore Atkinson Jr., had her portrait painted by John Singleton Copley in 1765 at the age of 19.

At first glance, the painting appears to be a simple portrait of a well-dressed eighteenth-century woman. The portrait sitter is striking in her appearance—she sits in a bentwood chair, her hands resting on the small table in front of her. Her dark hair is adorned with a string of pearls and she wears a dress fashioned from a variety of expensive and luxurious fabrics. A closer look at the portrait reveals details about both the artist and the sitter.



Copley learned the art of portrait painting from his stepfather, a British-trained artist named Peter Pelham. Copley was known to dress his patrons in costumes made from sumptuous fabrics that were difficult to capture in a painting. The satin, lace, and velvet that Mrs. Atkinson wears are rendered with incredible skill and care, conveying the delicate textures of each material. Her forearm and fingers cast slight reflections on the highly polished surface of the table. The smooth marble column and beckoning texture of the red velvet drape in the background contribute to a rich sensory environment that has the ability to enchant and captivate viewers. Each of these details, and more, were carefully inserted into the portrait as an advertisement of Copley's skill as a painter.

Another figure casting reflections on the table is the small American flying squirrel sitting in front of Copley's subject. During the late eighteenth century, squirrels "were featured in several emblem books... as symbols of desirable character traits." The image of a squirrel eating the meat from a nut was commonly interpreted as a symbol of patience, diligence, and perseverance. Many interpretations of the squirrel's relationship to Mrs. Atkinson have been offered. While there is not a definitive interpretation to explain the animal's inclusion, it is clear that there is a deeper symbolic intention. Copley was deft at crafting "visual biographies" of the characteristics his sitters wanted to present. Mrs. Atkinson gazes confidently out at the viewer. Her posture is practiced, yet effortless, and she makes her self-confidence and poise known to anyone viewing her portrait.

Both the artist of this portrait and the sitter wanted to convey messages about themselves through this painting. The artist focused on creating a display of his technical skill as a means to increase his circle of patrons. The sitter wished to portray herself as a confident, well-mannered member of high society. Both of those goals were easily accomplished in this portrait, and the messages that Copley and Mrs. Atkinson attempted to convey are understandable today.



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John Singleton Copley, *Mrs. Theodore Atkinson Jr. (Frances Deering Wentworth)*, 1765, oil on canvas, 51 x 40 in.