



*Crowninshield's Wharf, 1806*  
George Ropes, Jr. (1788-1819)

## Crowninshield's Wharf, 1806

George Ropes, Jr. (1788-1819)

Salem, MA

Oil on canvas

Gift of Nathaniel Slisbee

M3459



### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

During the years following the Revolutionary War, many of Salem's merchants grew wealthy through the China and East Indies trade. Their revenues also supported craftsmen, artists, and others who built new homes, and supplied the newly-wealthy with stylish goods and superior services. Additionally, the tax revenues collected in Salem's ports substantially supported the federal government at a time when it had many debts from the Revolutionary War. Unfortunately, the heyday of this trade did not last long in this city. Jefferson's Embargo Act in 1807, the War of 1812, and the introduction of faster clipper ships that required deeper harbors than those in Salem led to the demise of what is termed Salem's "Golden Age of Sail."

### ART HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Although George Ropes only lived to age thirty, he produced a number of works that portray daily scenes of life in Salem. He worked as a sign, carriage, and landscape/marinescape painter to support his family following his father's death. Here, at age eighteen, he has captured a wharf built by George Crowninshield and Sons and also several ships that they owned: the *America*, *Fame*, *Prudent* and *Belisarius*. Because merchants made money when their vessels were exchanging goods in other ports, it is unlikely that all of these vessels would have been in Salem's port at once. Curious, too, is the lack of activity on the wharf, which would have been bustling with workers. Rather than considering this painting as a view of a typical work, it should be seen as a pristine view of the Crowninshields' wealth and accomplishment.

### SAMPLE GUIDING QUESTIONS

- Describe Crowninshield's Wharf and the ships that belong to this family.
- What might these ships have been used for?
- To what class do you believe the Crowninshield family belonged?
- How do you think the Crowninshields and other families in Salem felt about the many ships and wharves that people owned in this city?
- Why might this painting have been created?
- What does it suggest about the importance of the China trade to the inhabitants of Salem?
- What predictions could you make for this wharf 5, 10, or 15 years later? Why?

### SUGGESTED LEARNING ACTIVITIES

- Compare this painting to the Salem Marine Society Certificate in this guide. What accounts for the improvements that merchants were able to make to their wharves?

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