



Portrait of Sarah Erving Waldo, c. 1765
John Singleton Copley (1737-1815)t

Peabody Essex Museum
Salem in History, 2006

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John Singleton Copley (1737-1815)

Boston

Oil on canvas

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Charles Edward Cotting, 1976

M16521



HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In 1765, Boston was a very successful British colony with a thriving merchant class that was loyal to the king. When Parliament passed the Stamp Act that year, however, colonists were outraged. Until then, colonies passed their own taxes, and they resented this change. Rioting and violent protest broke out across the colonies. In Massachusetts, James Otis convinced the state assembly to send a letter to the other colonies in order to organize a meeting to plan reasoned resistance. The Stamp Act Congress met in New York City in October 1765, and delegates approved a “Declaration of Rights and Grievances.” Parliament finally agreed to repeal the Stamp Act, but later passed other taxes on the colonies.

Throughout the Stamp Act conflict, colonists maintained their commitment to Britain, and they continued to consume the best British goods that they could afford.

ART HISTORICAL CONTEXT

John Singleton Copley was a self-taught artist from Boston, MA. As a gifted and ambitious artist, Copley longed to match his talent against the best painters in Britain. As political tensions rose in Boston, Copley set his sight on London and eventually settled there with his family, which had British merchant ties. Copley’s compositions were often based on British prints – engraved reproductions of paintings – and therefore reflected British artistry and style as he understood it.

In his *Portrait of Sarah Erving Waldo*, Copley uses his extraordinary facility at rendering minute detail and textures to convey the richness of the objects. Satin, lace, pearls, and polished wood are brought to life. Copley focuses the viewer’s attention on the message of luxury and success that his sitters wanted to communicate.

Sarah Erving was the daughter of merchant and mariner John Erving and his wife, Abigail Phillips Erving. Sarah married Samuel Waldo in 1762 in Boston. Two years after her marriage, Waldo commissioned the artists John Singleton Copley to paint this portrait of Sarah. She sits at a tea table, which is appropriate for her married role as a hostess. The cherry branch that she elegantly holds also suggests her fertility and the general “abundance” in her married life. Waldo exemplifies Colonial wealth just as tensions with Great Britain emerged.

SAMPLE GUIDING QUESTIONS

- Describe Sarah Waldo Erving Waldo’s clothing and surroundings. Of what class do you believe she and her family belong?
- Sarah Erving married in 1765. Can you find any symbolism in the painting that might suggest her role as a married woman? (Consider what a wealthy colonial family might hope would result from a “successful” marriage.)
- Copley, Boston artist, used British prints (engraved reproductions of paintings) as models for the composition of his paintings. What does this suggest about his subjects’ feeling toward Britain in 1765?
- Does this painting suggest that the protest over the Stamp Act in 1765 affected Sarah Erving Waldo’s desire to appear as a fashionable British colonial subject?

SUGGESTED LEARNING ACTIVITIES

- Compare this portrait with that of Elias Haskett Derby. How do the artists depict the success and wealth of these 18th century subjects? In what ways are they distinct because