



A PORTRAIT TO BE TREASURED ONCE AGAIN

A Copley Pastel of a Boston Maiden

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ne of the issues that challenge collectors, dealers, and curators alike is how to authenticate a work of art that is not signed by the artist and for which there is no documentation. The portrait shown in figure 1 originally presented just such a challenge. Stylistically it has all the hallmarks of a pastel by John Singleton Copley (1738–1815), who created about fifty-five portraits in this medium between 1758 and when he departed for Europe in 1774; the vast majority of his sitters were Boston residents. For Copley, this was an easy medium in which to work and, as it placed little demand for repeated sittings, won favor with his clients.

The sitter in this portrait has the commanding gaze that distinguishes Copley's portraits from those of his contemporaries. A comparison with Copley's signed 1769 pastel of Governor John Wentworth (fig. 2), with its restrained palette, and rendering of light to sculptural effect suggests this pastel may have been produced at about the same time.

Technical analysis further supports a Copley attribution. On two pieces of conjoined coarse-laid paper glued to a seamed two-piece linen canvas and mounted on a yellow poplar strainer, the work measures twenty-three by eighteen inches, which is well within the size range of Copley's known pastels. Microscopic analysis reveals that the paper support has the distinctive red and blue silk fibers found on Copley's signed pastels.¹



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Fig. 1: Attributed to John Singleton Copley (1738–1815), *Elizabeth Hiller*, ca. 1770. Pastel, 23 x 17 $\frac{1}{4}$ inches (sight). Private collection.

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Fig. 2: John Singleton Copley (1738–1815), *Governor John Wentworth*, 1769. Signed and dated, center right: JSC in monogram. Pastel on laid paper, 23 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 17 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches. Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire: gift of Mrs. Esther Lowell Abbott in memory of her Husband Gordon Abbott.

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Fig. 3: Queen Anne carved walnut balloon seat side chair, Boston, 1750. H. 38 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches. Sotheby's No. 7594 NY sale, lot #58.

A photograph from the collection of Mr. & Mrs. Ted Samuel of San Francisco, California was published in January 1954 issue of *The Magazine Antiques* (page 47). In the photo caption, this chair was identified as having been acquired from a family that came to California in 1890 bringing with them heirlooms from the Foster, Hiller, Appleton and Wentworth families of Boston.

The first known reference to this pastel was as a part of an auction lot in a Sotheby's New York salesroom in 2003—"Lot #106: American School. 18th century—portrait of a dark-haired young woman in a gray satin dress, pastel on paper." Although the sale was billed as "property from a private West Coast collection," according to *Maine Antiques Digest* (March 2004), those in the trade knew it was the estate of Ted Samuel, a prominent San Francisco antiques dealer with a passion for Americana.

A Queen Anne chair (fig. 3), another lot from the sale, had been published earlier in the January 1954 issue of *The Magazine Antiques* (page 47) as part of the collection of Mr. & Mrs. Ted Samuel of San Francisco. In the photo caption, it was catalogued as having been acquired from a family who came to California in 1890,





Fig. 4: Joseph Hiller (1746–1814) after Copley, *The Hon. John Hancock*, ca. 1770. Inscribed lower left border “Jos. Hiller fecit.” Mezzotint with watercolor, 9 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 7 $\frac{1}{8}$ inches. Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Mass.

Hiller’s mezzotint of Hancock survives in two versions. The earliest version is in the collection of the Smithsonian identifies the sitter as the Honorable John Hancock Esq. The later version as shown here identifies the sitter as President of the Continental Congress. Hiller, like Hancock, was a patriot. He supported the cause by offering subscriptions to the *Massachusetts-Spy* at his shop in Salem lending a voice to the cause.

bringing with them heirlooms from the Foster, Hiller, Appleton, and Wentworth families of Boston. This 1954 photo caption provided the first solid clue leading to the sitter’s identification.

Investigation of these four families revealed a descendant common to all four: Elizabeth Hiller Foster, who moved to California following her 1898 marriage to Frank Winchester. The family heirlooms she brought with her included the chair

described above (fig. 3); three Federal Fire Society of Portsmouth, New Hampshire, fire buckets—two had belonged to Joseph Hiller Foster (1825–1885), who was admitted to the society in 1853, and one to his son William Russell Foster (1855–1883); and a wooden carving of William Shakespeare that had originally belonged to Joseph Hiller.² All these items were sold with the pastel in the 2003 Sotheby’s sale. Given this provenance, the next challenge was to

address the issue of identifying the sitter.

Joseph Hiller, born in Boston in 1721, was a silversmith and jeweler with a thriving business in Boston. His wife, Hannah Welch, was the daughter of Thomas Welch and Elizabeth Hurd, and her uncle was Jacob Hurd (1702–1758), a prominent silversmith on Cornhill, who served as executor for Hannah’s father’s estate in 1755. Their son Joseph Hiller, a jeweler and a watchmaker and tax collector for Salem, made mezzotints after Copley (fig. 4). Hannah’s cousin John Hurd, a Boston dry goods merchant born in 1727, served as tax collector for the crown in New Hampshire. In the latter role, he exchanged correspondence with Copley and was closely acquainted with Copley’s pastel portraits of Governor John Wentworth.³ Another cousin, Nathaniel Hurd, born in 1730, was one of the earliest native engravers on copper in the country. A noted engraver after Copley, he was Copley’s sitter on at least two occasions (fig. 5). According to family lore, a third cousin, Benjamin Hurd, born in 1739, was Copley’s pupil in the art of portraiture.

These connections make it probable that the sitter was a Hiller. There is even a close physical resemblance between the sitter (fig. 1) and Nathaniel Hurd (fig. 5). Both have oval shaped faces, high foreheads, heavy eyebrows, Greek noses, and clear complexions. A careful review of family dates and circumstances further narrows the sitter to one prime candidate—Elizabeth Hiller, the daughter of Joseph Hiller and Hannah Welch born in Boston in 1750. Following her father’s death in 1758, Elizabeth lived with her widowed mother and two younger sisters in the family home in William’s Court on Cornhill. In 1770, her mother came into the rest of her inheritance from her father Thomas Welch, a *joiner* who left a substantial estate in Charlestown.⁴ Having her eldest, unmarried daughter pose for a pastel portrait by Copley was perhaps Hannah’s way of celebrating her improved circumstances as well as announcing Elizabeth’s eligibility for marriage. It is

surely no coincidence that Elizabeth's brother Joseph made his mezzotint after Copley's portrait of John Hancock (fig. 4) that same year. Perhaps it was Joseph who initiated the commission in the first place.

The demeanor and attire of the sitter are befitting an unmarried daughter of the artisan class. She is wearing a simple gray silk dress with matching lace collar, bow, and a bonnet, the end of which she is clutching with her right hand. The inclusion of one hand figures in later Copley pastels such as his 1770 portrait of Mrs. Elijah Vose⁵ and may have added to the cost of her portrait.

Comparison with Copley's circa-1770 portrait of Sarah Henshaw (fig. 6) also suggests a circa-1770 dating for Elizabeth's portrait. Both sitters are portrayed against a dark background dressed in gray satin gowns with delicately articulated lace trim and with a single hand grasping a part of their attire. Elizabeth would have been 20 years old at that time and residing within easy proximity to Copley's studio.

On March 17, 1773, Elizabeth married bank clerk James Foster in the New North Church in Boston and the couple set up housekeeping in the Hiller family home on William's Court. When James died intestate in 1793,⁶ like her mother before her, Elizabeth supported her family by maintaining a boarding house in the family home.⁷ To ease the burden of raising eight children, her brother Joseph took her youngest son, John Welch Foster, to live with him in Salem.

Following Elizabeth's death in 1806, her portrait probably passed to her youngest son, John Welch Foster (1789–1852),⁸ then to his son Joseph Hiller Foster (born 1825), and after his death in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, in 1885,⁹ to his daughter Elizabeth Hiller Foster (1871–1956), the sitter's namesake, who took the pastel to California. Such a provenance would be consistent with the history of ownership of other Hiller family items featured in the Sotheby sale. The pastel was sold in the same lot as a

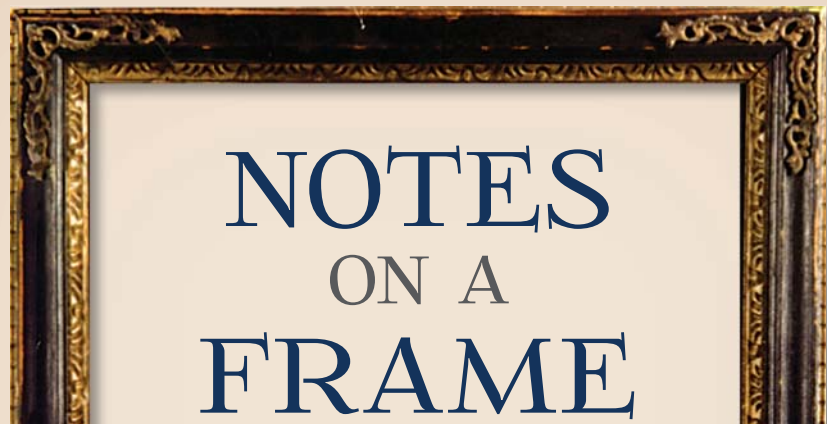
textile by Lois Barber. Born 1752, she was the wife of David Barber and the great-grandmother of Elizabeth Hiller Foster on her mother's side. Elizabeth Hiller Foster clearly inherited items from her maternal side as well as paternal side.

Why was there no documentation with the pastel? Since the sitter was from the artisan class, the portrait may have been done in exchange for services or goods, so neither party would have recorded it. The 1888 label on the backing (see below [Notes of a Frame]) cites a "record of this picture...in the tin trunk," but this record does not appear to have been brought to the West Coast by the family, and they may not have known it was a Copley pastel when they sold it to Samuel, who, with his expertise in oriental rugs and his passion was American furniture, apparently did not recognize Copley's hand either.

To conclude, through close comparison with Copley's signed works, this pastel may be confidently attributed to the hand of Copley. If it is indeed a portrait of Elizabeth Hiller as its probable history of ownership suggests, it also serves as a tangible reminder of the heady years leading up to the Revolution, when a maiden from the artisan class was as deserving of a portrait by America's leading portrait artist as any member of Boston's elite. **AEA**

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1. See Marjorie Shelley, "Painting in Crayon: The Pastels of John Singleton Copley." In *John Singleton Copley in America* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1995), 127–143.



The pastel in figure 1 is currently mounted in a Boston frame made between 1760 and 1770. It has gilded pewter corner mounts made from a single mould in emulation of the more sophisticated English version which has mounts made from two moulds. The frame is not original to the pastel. It has been cut down and bears no sign of the water damage still visible in the upper-left corner and along the bottom above the strainer line and in the lower right corner.¹⁰

An inscription "In safe deposit box at Elmwood Industrial Trust Company [Providence, RI] 1/50" on the modern brown paper covering the reverse suggests the pastel was fastened into its current frame sometime before 1950.¹¹

Above the inscription is a laid paper label written in an earlier hand "a record of this picture is in the tin trunk with the deeds & etc." Below that is a partial date "/ 20/[1888, and remnants of a signature: "A.? H. Perkins" or "Att. Perkins." At this juncture, it is still not clear who Perkins was—an estate appraiser, an executor of the estate, an attorney, or a distant family member and/or servant?¹² Neither the tin trunk or the safety deposit box have been located.



LEFT:

Fig. 5: Nathaniel Hurd, c. 1765. John Singleton Copley (American, 1738–1815). Oil on canvas, 76.2 x 64.8 cm. The Cleveland Museum of Art. Gift of the John Huntington Art and Polytechnic Trust, 1915.534.

In his “Sketch of the life and a list of some of the works of John Singleton Copley” (Cambridge, Mass, 1873) Augustus Thorndike Perkins (1827–1891) described Nathaniel Hurd as an excellent artist and possibly a pupil of Copley’s half-brother Peter Pelham.

ABOVE:

Fig. 6: John Singleton Copley (1738–1815), Sarah Henshaw, wife of Joseph Henshaw, ca. 1770. Pastel, 24 x 17¾ inches. The Bayou Bend Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.

2. Joseph Hiller Foster wrote in an 1851 letter that accompanied this lot (#138), “this copy was carved in England, and belonged to my maternal grandfather Joseph Hiller, who died in the year 1758—when it became the property of my uncle, his only surviving son, Joseph Hiller.” The carving had been featured in a bookplate for Hiller’s bookstore on Cornhill Square in Boston from 1803 until 1806 when his partnership with Samuel Hall was dissolved. In 1814, it passed to John Welch Foster, and in 1851 to his son Joseph.
3. John Hurd was closely acquainted with Copley. In his letter to the artist, written from Portsmouth, N.H. on May 4, 1770, he discusses Copley’s portrait of the governor [John Wentworth] which he had just received and compares it to Copley’s earlier copy which the Hurd family had admired. In closing, he conveys his wife’s compliments to Mrs. Copley and mentions entertaining Copley in Portsmouth. See *Letters and Papers of John Singleton Copley and Henry Pelham, 1739–1776*. Boston, MA: Massachusetts Historical Society, Vol. 71, 1914. Accessed books.google.com.
4. Thomas Welch probate record no. 24024, Mass. State Archives, Dorchester, Mass.
5. Illustrated *John Singleton Copley in America*, page 133. See also Neil Jeffares, *Dictionary of pastellists before 1800*. Accessed pastellists.com)

6. James Foster probate record no. 20240, Mass. State Archives.
7. 1796 Boston City Directory: Elizabeth Foster, female widow, address William’s Court, Cornhill, Boston, occupation boarding house accommodation.
8. John W. Foster, 1852 inventory, old series, docket No. 16308, Rockingham County, N.H., probate. Clause I states the property of his wife Mary Appleton Foster was kept in a separate set of books standing in her name. This infers that he kept books of his own property which may have been part of the records cited as being in the tin trunk on the paper label dated 1888.
9. Joseph Hiller Foster, 1885, new series, docket No. 4624, Rockingham County, N.H., probate. Given his death date of 1885, the label dated 1888 backing the portrait may be a reference to Joseph Hiller Foster’s yet to be located estate papers.
10. This damage necessitated retouching in two areas—the knuckle and a part of the lace held in her hand. There is also an area of infill and coloring in the vicinity of the sitter’s chest. Remnants of water-damaged newspaper clippings and uncut labels of a Newport, Rhode Island hat maker are present on the back of the strainer. The various snippets of newspaper clippings cite an 1801 trial involving payment for a cadaver. The dating of this trial suggests the pastel underwent repair shortly thereafter.

11. The company being cited is the Industrial Trust Company of Providence, RI. The company began business on August 1, 1887 and offered a safe deposit box service through Rhode Island Safe Deposit Company. In the 1890 Board of Trade Journal, the company’ was located on 57 Westminster Street in Providence and advertising their services as a legal depository for guardians, executors, administrators, trustees, receivers, assignees. By 1950, the company had four branch offices in Providence including one at 582 Elmwood Avenue*—abbreviated here to Elmwood Industrial Trust Company by the later hand. In 1953, Industrial Trust Company name was changed to Industrial National Bank
12. Remnants of water-damaged newspaper clippings and uncut labels of a Newport, Rhode Island hat maker are present on the back of the strainer. The various snippets of newspaper clippings cite an 1801 trial involving payment for a cadaver. The dating of this trial suggests the pastel underwent repair shortly thereafter.
13. As the trust company was located in Providence, Rhode Island, it seems plausible the label may refer to Joseph H. Perkins (1819–1889), a Providence attorney. Another possible Perkins candidate is Copley scholar Augustus Thorndike Perkins (1827–1891). He was an attorney with ties to Boston and Salem.