

A Man, A Family, A Discussion: Using Copley's Art in the Classroom



Students are fascinated by the use of visuals in the classroom. The fine arts provide a wonderful way to transform lectures into exciting and engaging discussions. Paintings provide accessible representations of some of the more complicated themes to which the students are exposed in their humanities-based classes. One painting that I have used with my Advanced Placement United States History students is John Singleton Copley's *The Copley Family*. This painting serves as a wonderful springboard for discussions of gendered constructs of power, historiography, and the Lockean justification of the right to rebel.

John Singleton Copley, a resident of Boston, Massachusetts, for most of his life, until he moved to England in 1774, began to portray himself and his family on canvas in 1776, just as thirteen of Britain's North American colonies were in the process of declaring their independence. Even though Copley was in England at the time he completed this work, and while he was to some degree a Loyalist through marriage, the painting reveals much about changes that occurred in the American family during the late eighteenth century and that

were related to the Lockean ideals that drove the American Revolution. Just as Jefferson turned to Lockean thought to justify the American Revolution, Copley captures the Lockean ideal of the family on canvas. In this sense, Loyalist, or at the very least political neutral, and Patriot converge.

Before unveiling Copley's depiction of his family for the students, we explore certain topics related to the relationship between gender and power; in particular, I explain the evolution in the colonies from the Filmerian system to the Lockean system. The Filmerian system, dominant in early-modern English political thought, viewed the family as a microcosm of the state. The father became a miniature king, and the wife, children, and servants became the patriarch's subjects.

I ask my students to speculate about any impact this gendered construct of power would have had on the issue of rebellion. The students gradually begin to uncover the notion that this construct supported the idea of absolutism as it reinforced a distinct social hierarchy that was basically masculine in nature. I explain to the students that during the English Civil War the Royalists formulated an argument against rebellion that proved unshakable for nearly half a century. The Royalists reasoned that since families were miniature kingdoms and fathers were, in essence, kings, if subjects did indeed have the right to rebel, then dependents in the home had the right to rebel against the patriarch. The Roundheads could not address this argument and thus failed to adequately philosophically justify their rebellion.



The Copley Family, c. 1776, by John Singleton Copley; Andrew W. Mellon Fund, image

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Inevitably a student will want to know how Jefferson could defend revolution in the Declaration; how did he succeed where the Roundheads had failed? This begins to move the class toward an examination of *The Copley Family*. I explain to the class that it took another rebellion to produce a work that would change attitudes toward both rebellion and the family. John Locke, in defending the

Glorious Revolution, 1688/89, both successfully defended the right to rebel, and thus influenced Jefferson as he wrote the Declaration, and reconstructed the notion of the family, which influenced Copley when he painted *The Copley Family*. Locke challenged the Filmerian System as he redefined the state of nature. To Locke, reason dictated that man should help his fellow man, while biology dictated that man should enter into a relationship with a woman and eventually start a family. However, Locke recognized that reason does not guide everyone, thus necessitating the creation of government to protect both one's life and property. Locke showed that the state and the family were not related nor were they analogous since the family emerged before the state. To Locke, the right to rebel had nothing to do with rebellion within the home; homes were not miniature monarchies, and husbands were not miniature monarchs.

Locke successfully separated the state and the family, thus allowing for the right of rebellion to exist in a manner less threatening to patriarchs. With this right to rebel established, Jefferson was able to successfully defend the colonies' right to rebel against England in the Declaration of Independence. Yet the Lockean ideal of the family also redefined the woman's role in society. The idea of the Cult of Domesticity emerged with the American Revolution and provided a way in which women could find a role in the new republic. Women were the instruments through which morally upright, virtuous citizens would enter political life, something essential in a republic. Men, though less virtuous, were more capable of surviving in the more dangerous public sphere while women, being more nurturing, were better suited to raise children.

At this point I show the students *The Copley Family*. The painting reflects all of these themes nicely. I take the students from one section of the painting to another, asking how the painting reflects this Lockean ideal of the family. The students are quick to point out how Copley's wife, Susanna, looks lovingly at her son, who equally lovingly looks toward her. All the while yet another child clings to Susanna's arm, fearfully looking at the viewer; comfort can only be found in her mother's arms. Students can see how the virtue and nurturing nature of women is clearly reflected in the mother's face and through the calm manner she exhibits as not one but two children demand her attention. The students find it humorous as we juxtapose the loving relationship between mother and children with the interaction between Copley's father-in-law and daughter. The grandfather looks off in the distance away from the child, he holds the child in an incredibly awkward manner, and the discomfort felt by the child is clearly evident on the child's face as the child unsuccessfully reaches out to her grandfather for comfort.

In discussing eye contact made by the subjects in the painting with the viewer, a perceptive student observes that Copley himself is one of three figures to look directly toward us, and wonders if that matters. One student suggests he may be pulling the viewers into the painting as he intimately engages us through eye contact. Another student offers that he is tying himself to the public sphere by looking away from his family and toward the painting's audience. At this point, a student observes that Copley is unveiling the public

sphere that exists behind the curtains. We begin to agree that this world is his world, masculine in nature, not fit for women. His wife is oblivious to this world as she looks inward, toward her child and family, in her own sphere.

The students have now examined a visual reflection of the familial ideal that shaped the emerging republic as women became relegated to the private sphere and men dominated the public sphere. Through discussion, students point out that it is this model that the suffragists, Lowell factory girls, and even women soldiers in the Civil War challenged as they attempted to enter the public sphere. But the students' exploration of this beautiful painting is not over. I inform the students that while the painting strongly suggests that gendered spheres were indeed emerging just as the United States declared its independence, not all historians support the idea that such a gendered division of society existed during this period. While the Lockean system may have been an ideal construct, it was not an entirely accurate portrayal of early national and antebellum American society. Women did find ways in which to operate within the public sphere, which was supposedly masculine and inaccessible to them. Carolyn Lawes argues nicely in her work *Women and Reform* that such gendered spheres were not the reality in antebellum America. Lawes demonstrates that through the church, through sewing circles, through work with orphans, and through work outside of the home, women found "room to maneuver" and challenge the ideals of Republican Motherhood and the Cult of Domesticity. In essence, by using the very stereotypes that attempted to relegate women to the home, women were able to find ways in which they could "exert themselves and enforce their will upon a rapidly changing community."

In this light, the students explore how *The Copley Family* could reveal not only the ideal of the Cult of Domesticity, but the painting could also reveal a society in which public and private spheres merged. A student will mention how the only other figure besides Copley and his young daughter—the one who is holding onto Susanna in distress—to clearly look at the viewer is Copley's oldest daughter who stands alone in the center of the painting. We all agree that she exerts a degree of independence as she pulls the viewer into the painting to meet her family. She is not tied to the domestic sphere but, like her father, is interacting with the viewer who is in the public sphere. A student excitedly observes that the doll tossed to the side in the painting wears the same clothes as this daughter. Another student suggests that this could reinforce the idea that she is approaching adulthood since the doll is tied to her through clothing yet has been tossed to the side. The class tends to agree that this is a young lady who will soon be finding ways to interact in the public sphere. I then point out to the students how the floral pattern on the carpet allows the private sphere to merge with the public sphere that Copley reveals to the viewer. The floral pattern on the carpet ties the home to the public sphere, thus suggesting that the two spheres are interconnected, similar to the "unofficial sphere" that Catherine Allgor examines in her work *Parlor Politics*, in which the women of Washington D.C. allowed their homes to become the medium through which national political issues could be settled.

In this manner, *The Copley Family* not only reflects the themes related to Republican Motherhood and the Cult of Domesticity, it also nicely reflects the rich and complex historiography surrounding women's history during the early national and antebellum periods.

Using *The Copley Family* in the classroom provides an excellent visual representation of important themes related to the founding of the United States, allowing students to explore these themes but also to better understand how to work with primary documents and to realize that history is truly a dialogue among historians. Teachers can enhance their lessons greatly by turning to the fine arts as a foundation upon which to create lessons and begin class discussions. In this way, the teacher can produce multimodal lessons that can pull visual learners into class discussions and enhance overall student understanding and enjoyment of history.

Further Reading:

Catherine Allgor, *Parlor Politics: In Which the Ladies of Washington Help Build a City and a Government* (Charlottesville, 2000); DeAnne Blanton and Lauren M. Cook, *They Fought Like Demons: Women Soldiers in the American Civil War* (Baton Rouge, 2002); Ava Chamberlain, "The Immaculate Ovum: Jonathan Edwards and the Construction of the Female Body," *William and Mary Quarterly* 57 (2000): 289-322; Richard Allen Chapman, "Leviathan Writ Small: Thomas Hobbes on the Family," *The American Political Science Review* 69 (1975): 76-90; Frances E. Dolan, *Dangerous Familiars: Representations of Domestic Crime in England 1550-1700* (Ithaca, 1994); Linda K. Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect & Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill, 1980); Carolyn Lawes, *Women and Reform in a New England Community 1815-1860* (Lexington, 2000), quoted at 182; Elizabeth D. Leonard, *All the Daring of the Soldier: Women of the Civil War Armies* (New York, 1999); Ann M. Little, review of *A Shared Experience: Men, Women, and the History of Gender* in *William and Mary Quarterly*, 56 (1999): 624-28; Mary Beth Norton, *Founding Mothers and Fathers: Gendered Power and the Forming of American Society* (New York, 1996); Mary Lyndon Shanley, "Marriage Contract and Social Contract in Seventeenth-Century English Political Thought," in *The Family in Political Thought*, ed. by J. B. Elshtain (Amherst, 1982); Thomas G. West, *Vindicating the Founders: Race, Class, Sex and Justice in the Origins of America* (Lanham, 2001); Karin Wulf, *Not all Wives: Women of Colonial Philadelphia* (Ithaca, 2000).

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