

The Makers of Copley's Picture Frames: A Clue

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Among the most sophisticated and delightful expressions of the rococo in America during the third quarter of the eighteenth century are the elaborate carved and gilded frames which surround many portraits executed by John Singleton Copley prior to his departure for Europe in June of 1774. Several of these frames, including that which surrounds *Mr. Isaac Smith* (Figure 1), have a simplified gadrooned inner molding, and a pierced outer edge containing leafage and trailing flowers with confronting c-shapes at the corners and in the middle of each rail. Occasionally an ornament, such as a pierced shell, graces the middle of the top rail.¹

The source of these frames has been of interest to scholars and antiquarians for many years. An early tradition that they were the work of Paul Revere is totally without basis, and has been laid to rest by many authors. The possibility that London was their source must be given serious consideration, despite the lack of specific evidence. London was the center of the framemaking trade for eighteenth century Boston, and when the Boston selectmen wished to purchase a suitable frame for John Smibert's portrait of Peter Faneuil, they noted that it could be "got in London cheaper and better than with us."² Copley, writing to an English mezzotinter on 25 January 1765, asked the Englishman to advise him on the price of different kinds of frames.³ Later that same year John Powell of London billed Copley for a "Case of Frames and Glasses," but as the entire bill, including

brushes and cloths, totaled only £9.10.6, these frames must have been small and simple, or probably for miniatures.⁴ On 6 June 1771 Henry Pelham ordered for Copley a number of supplies including glass, cloths, brushes, putty, poppy oil, vermilion, and white lead from the London merchants Henry and Thomas Bromfield.⁵ This order contains no mention of picture frames, nor is there any other evidence, to our knowledge, that Copley imported frames from England. We do know that the matching frame of *Mrs. Isaac Smith* (Yale University Art Gallery) is made of *pinus strobus* (northeast American white pine),⁶ but as this wood was exported to London in the eighteenth century, conclusive statements asserting a Boston or American origin cannot safely be made.

An exchange of letters in the Copley-Pelham correspondence does give us a clue that Copley purchased frames from local Boston craftsmen, at least in 1771. During that year, Copley went to New York on his famous visit to paint the local aristocracy. While Copley was away from Boston, Henry Pelham kept him supplied with frames, writing on 10 September 1771,

Inclosed, is Captn. Paschall Smith's Receipt for a Box of Frames, which I hope will arrive safe to hand. The Frames are (I think) as good as any that have been done, and are such, as I hope will please the Taste of the Gentry at New York.

Pelham added as a reminder,

If you should have Occasion for more [frames], you would do well to lett me know as soon as possible, that they may

be ready to goe by Capt'n Smith, when he makes his next Trip.⁷

Ten days later, Copley replied to Pelham's note:

Your favour by Capt Smith I received yesterday and shall answer paragraph by paragraph. The frames came safe to hand, and I hope will do, but shall know better when they have been seen by those who will want frames, and soon as possible if they will answer you shall have my orders.⁸

Copley must have placed an order with Pelham, for in an important postscript to a letter dated 12 October 1771, Copley notes

I have parted with the two small frames, but cannot yet give orders for more. because I would have none come but what are engaged. you must let me know the price of the small ones; I know that of the Large ones. let me know what you paid Welch for Carving and Whiting for Gilding and Give my compts. to Capt. Joy.⁹

A check of the Boston records quickly reveals that Copley was most likely referring here to John Welch (1711-1789) and Stephen Whiting (1728-1789). The mention of John Joy, housewright, in the same sentence as the reference to Welch and Whiting does create some ambiguity as to Copley's precise meaning. At this time (1771), Joy was supervising the work being done on Copley's Beacon Hill home, and the last sentence of the above quotation could be read as implying that Welch and Whiting were performing work on the interior of the house. But as Jules Prown tells us, it is clear that

Joy was in fact the contractor for the entire job, and in the agreement [with Copley] obligated himself to obtain all materials and to do or have done the necessary works of the carpenters, masons, stonecutters, turners, diggers, and carters.¹⁰

All payments were made directly to Joy, and therefore Pelham would not have been in the position of paying Welch and

Whiting for work connected with the house.

John Welch's carving of the "sacred cod" of Massachusetts has given him a minor place in the literature concerning early American wood carving and sculpture. The basic data concerning his life has been gathered together and published in several places, and need not be repeated here.¹¹ While Welch has traditionally been regarded as a prosperous ship carver, a recent reassessment of his career concludes that he was "one of the most important" carvers of Boston Chippendale furniture,¹² a judgement which would be solidly reinforced should we be able to positively attribute the Copley frames to his hand. There exists a possibility that Welch visited England for a few years after 1758, and the immediate and direct contact with English design sources would have had a profound effect on his artistic development.¹³

Welch purchased land from Copley in May of 1774 (reselling it later for a substantial profit), but this is the only other document linking the two men together.¹⁴ No other connection with Stephen Whiting, the gilder referred to by Copley, has as yet been found.

As with John Welch, Stephen Whiting's career has been sketched in print before, and need only be highlighted here.¹⁵ Born and raised in Concord, Whiting moved to Boston as early as 1739 and by 1743 he was in business for himself there, selling

Pier and Sconce Looking-Glasses, Chimney and Pocket Ditto, Mezzo Tinto Prints, painted on Glass in gilt Frames, ditto in both Pair-Tree and Pine Frames, Mahogany and Japan'd Tea Chests, best Prospectives, Barometers and Thermometer. . . .¹⁶

The following year, Whiting had for sale the "Just done . . . Effigies of the Rev. Mr. William Cooper, in Metzto-Tinto" by Peter

Pelham,¹⁷ and in 1747 he was offering Pelham's mezzotint of William Shirley.¹⁸ His first contacts with the young Copley probably came during the transactions concerning the sale of these prints. In 1754, Whiting was advertising the mezzotint of Reverend William Welstead, done by Copley at age thirteen.¹⁹

By 1757, Whiting was advertising that at his shop "Looking Glasses are Quick-silver'd, and Pictures and Maps framed and varnish'd."²⁰ Such activities continued to constitute part of his trade, as indicated by the following important advertisement of 1771:

At [Whiting's shop] Looking-Glasses are silvered, and Frames made for all sorts of Pictures, Looking-Glasses, Coats of Arms and Needle-Work, and gilt as best suits the Employer.

New Frames made for old Glasses, or new Glasses put to old Frames. Also, Varnishing, Japanning and Gilding done to Frames of all Sorts, as well and

reasonable as any are done in this Province.²¹

This notice clearly establishes that Whiting performed the type of work that Copley required for his picture frames. While Whiting's name is usually mentioned in any discussion of Boston japanners, as yet no work can be definitely attributed to him, and the possibility that he gilded Copley's frames adds a new dimension to our interest in his career.

Unfortunately, we know nothing else about Welch and Whiting's relationship with Copley, or their dealings with each other. None of the Copley frames examined by the writers have revealed any identifying labels, signatures, or marks. It is hoped that a continuing examination combined with further search in the documents will yield more concrete evidence concerning the makers of these superb frames.

NOTES

¹ This article is a condensed version of a seminar paper prepared under the direction of Jonathan Fairbanks, Curator of American Decorative Arts and Sculpture at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and the writers would like to express their gratitude to Mr. Fairbanks for suggesting the topic and later providing much encouragement and assistance.

² Quoted in Margaret Jourdain, "Some 18th-Century Picture Frames," *Apollo*, (January 1933), p.33.

³ *Letters and Papers of John Singleton Copley and Henry Pelham, 1739-1776*, Boston, 1914, p. 31 (hereafter referred to as *Copley-Pelham Letters*).

⁴ *Copley-Pelham Letters*, p. 37.

⁵ *Copley-Pelham Letters*, pp. 115-116.

⁶ Analysis performed by Gordon Saltar of Winterthur in January, 1971, and recorded in the files of the Yale University Art Gallery.

⁷ *Copley-Pelham Letters*, p. 155.

⁸ *Copley-Pelham Letters*, p. 159.

⁹ *Copley-Pelham Letters*, p. 166.

¹⁰ Jules D. Prown, *John Singleton Copley*, Cambridge, 1966, I, p. 65.

¹¹ See Mary Louise Brown, "John Welch, Carver," *Antiques* (January 1926), pp. 28-30, Mabel Swan, "Boston's Carvers and Joiners. Part I. Pre-Revolutionary," *Antiques* (March 1948), pp. 198-201, and Wayne Craven, *Sculpture in America*, New York, 1968, p. 10.

¹² Mary Ellen Hayward Yehia, "Ornamental Carving on Boston Furniture of the Chipendale Style," in *Boston Furniture of the Eighteenth Century*, Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts, Vol. 48, Boston, 1974, p. 213.

¹³ The evidence for this trip to England is inconclusive. In April of 1758, notices appeared in the Boston newspapers announcing that a

John Welch was "purposing to go for England in a short time," and listing his household effects to be sold at public vendue. These notices state that John Welch, occupation unspecified, had a house on Hanover Street, opposite that of Jacob Royall. To our knowledge, Welch the carver did not own a house or land on Hanover Street, and to further confuse the issue, at least two other John Welch's were living in Boston at the time.

On the other hand, John Welch did allow the lease on his shop to expire in 1758, and no firm record of his presence in Boston for the few years immediately following 1758 has been found. See Yehia, "Ornamental Carving," pp. 213-215.

¹⁴ Suffolk County Registry of Deeds, book 126, leaf 121.

¹⁵ See especially Esther Stevens Brazer, "The Early Boston Japanners," *Antiques* (May 1943), pp. 208-211, and Brock Jobe and Elizabeth Rhoades, "Recent discoveries in Boston japanned furniture," *Antiques* (May 1974), pp. 1082-1091.

¹⁶ *Boston Evening Post*, 23 January 1743/4, reprinted in George Francis Dow (compiler), *The Arts and Crafts in New England, 1704-1775*, Topsfield, 1927, pp. 127-128.

¹⁷ *Boston News-Letter*, 10 May 1774, in Dow, p. 34. Andrew Oliver, "Peter Pelham (c. 1697-1751), Sometime Printmaker of Boston," in *Boston Prints and Printmakers 1670-1775* Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts, Vol. 46, Boston, 1973, pp. 154-55, discusses Whiting's involvement with John Smibert and Peter Pelham in the making of this print.

¹⁸ *Boston Evening Post*, 27 July 1747, in Dow, p. 34.

¹⁹ *Boston Evening Post*, 27 May 1754, in Dow, p. 36.

²⁰ *Boston News-Letter*, 24 February 1757, in Dow, p. 23.

²¹ *Boston News-Letter*, 16 May 1771, in Dow, p. 32.