

# Moses in Miniature



Fig. 1: John Singleton Copley (1738–1815), *Moses Gill*, circa 1758–1759. Oil on gold-leaf primed copper, 1½ x 1½ inches. Courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2006.1. Purchase, Martha J. Fleischman Gift, in memory of her father, Lawrence A. Fleischman.

A Recently Discovered Portrait by John Singleton Copley

BY CARRIE REBORA BARRATT



The significance of a newly found portrait miniature (Fig. 1) by John Singleton Copley (1738–1815) is greater than its tiny size. Discoveries in the oeuvre of an artist so thoroughly studied, so scrupulously inventoried, so eagerly sought-after, are rare. This piece brings the artist's oeuvre in miniatures to thirty-six in all. That it is made of oil on gold-leaf primed copper makes it one of only six featuring this distinctive treatment. The sitter, Charlestown, Massachusetts, merchant Moses Gill (1733–1800), was thought to have broached his relationship with Copley in 1764, when he ordered large portraits of himself (Fig. 2) and his wife, five years after their marriage. This miniature token of affection dates earlier, from about 1758–1759, making Copley a savvy participant in his patron's wooing of his bride-to-be, and Gill a willing accomplice in the artist's experimentation with this medium.

Before the age of twenty, Copley had tried his hand at nearly every artistic medium available to him in colonial Boston. An industrious autodidact, he would test a new medium and then devise a means of improving upon it. He made his first serious drawings at age fourteen. (A few years later, he copied anatomical figure studies from medical texts into a sketchbook that he kept for reference throughout his career.) At age fifteen, he tried printmaking; the stepson of an engraver, young Copley re-scraped a copperplate into a fairly accomplished mezzotint. For

whatever reason, he never refined his technique in this art form,

preferring to deploy, rather than create, prints in his work. Copley initiated his well-known use of prints as the basis for oil on canvas pictures as early as 1754 with wholesale imitations of historical tableaux. What began as a strategy for learning and an outlet for ambition—the prints challenged him to learn compositional formula, detailed organization



**Fig. 2:** John Singleton Copley (1738–1815), *Portrait of Governor Moses Gill*, 1764. Oil on canvas, 49¾ x 39½ inches. Courtesy of Museum of Rhode Island School of Design, Jesse Metcalf Fund. Photography by Erik Gould.

of figures, and technical methods of transferal from one medium to another—turned to expert practice. He gradually became selective in his use of prints and eventually chose only certain key elements to suit individual pictures for discerning patrons. Copley's experimentation continued as he tested and perfected pastel, a tricky, powdery medium in sticks that was difficult to get in Boston. In 1762, he wrote to the French artist Jean-Etienne Liotard for advice and, following up on his reply, in 1765 he ordered from J. Powell, a London art supply purveyor, a full set of crayons. The genesis of Copley's contact with

the French artist remains one of the mysteries of his extraordinary artistic self-education.

In 1755, at age eighteen, Copley added another art form to his kit: miniature portraiture. That year he created his first miniature, a portrait now in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, of a woman known only as Mrs. Todd. For the portrait, he set to work in oil on a recycled and cut-down copper printing plate, the sort that he would have had in abundance from his late stepfather's studio. The used copper plates had a textural tooth that remained from scoring made to prepare the slick surface to hold ink; Copley appar-



**ABOVE:** Figure 1 actual size.





**Fig 3:** Array of cut playing cards from inside the locket case. Courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

ently liked the results of working on copper. Perhaps he had seen John Smibert's (1688–1751) oil on copper miniature of Samuel Browne (private collection), a work from 1734 that seems the only precedent in Boston at the time. But as he demonstrated in pastel, graphite, and on canvas, Copley had the capacity for results finer than anything he could have seen.

A shrewd entrepreneur with a knack for self-promotion, Copley probably had examples of his work in various media on view in his studio. His miniatures caught the attention of Andrew and Peter Oliver, brothers who between them ordered seven pieces in 1758–1759 (all of which remain in the family). Whether it was a case of rising to the occasion for this prominent family or seizing an opportunity to try something new—as we have seen he was wont to do—Copley employed a number of different techniques for the Olivers: oil on ivory (an unusual and ultimately unsatisfactory combination), oil on copper, and oil on gold-leaf

primed copper. The latter had a few advantages: gold added material richness, preserved the surface of the potentially corrosive copper, and, if worked properly, enhanced the luminosity of the subject's face. He tended to apply too much oil paint to achieve a radiating glow, but soon found a better medium for the desired translucent effect. On the verge of mastering oil on copper, he characteristically switched to the more difficult method of watercolor on ivory, which he would have known was the technique of contemporary English painters.

Copley's portrait of Gill was painted at the same time as the Oliver portraits. It is closest to the likeness of Andrew Oliver's wife, Mary Sanford, which is the same size, same medium, same nearly frontal pose, same pleasant smile on a fleshy face, and the same rather thick and linear application of paint. The gold leaf on Gill's image is invisible, offering no iridescence or glow because of the opacity of the oil medium, but shimmers through a minute loss on his

nostril. Gill's portrait is framed in a neat gold locket, glazed on the reverse to show four locks of his brown hair plaited in a simple overlapping pattern (Fig. 3). (Copley is known to have purchased lockets from Paul Revere and Nathaniel Hurd, but this locket, while original to the piece, is unattributed.) Copley cut playing cards to fit between the copper oval and the hairwork, a clever device common in England to ensure a tight fit, and yet another indication that Copley knew the tricks of the trade (Fig. 4). The bail at the top of the locket was meant for a slim ribbon, such as would be worn by a woman.

The woman who would have slipped this image of Gill's amiable countenance around her neck and tucked it into the folds of her gown or her bosom, was Sarah Prince (d. 1771). Gill presumably commissioned this token of affection as an engagement gift to her not long before their marriage on March 27, 1759. From Copley, Gill received a dignified and formal, albeit kindly, image, as





Fig. 4: Array of cut playing cards from inside the locket case, showing Gill's plaited hair in the reserve. Courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

unerring in likeness as it was flattering in aspect. His double chin, ruddy complexion, and the shadow of his beard reveal the real man, who has donned a fine gold-trimmed waistcoat and smart red jacket of the sort suggesting Grand Tour travels, although Gill who had never been out of Massachusetts. The complement of authentic face with tarted-up costume was Copley to a tee; precisely the mode he excelled in when he had a complicit patron like Gill.

One imagines Sarah Prince delighting in such a romantic and sophisticated gift, made poignant by the fact that her happy betrothal to Moses occurred in the wake of the death of her father, Reverend Thomas Prince (1687–1758), the pastor of Old South Church in Boston. As an only child, Sarah inherited his 3,000-acre estate, the so-called Rutland Lands, in the town that bore her family's name, Princeton, Massachusetts. Reverend Prince had accumulated the acreage over many years, beginning with the purchase of a small parcel in 1733. When Sarah inher-

ited the property in 1758, it was a mansion house set in a wilderness. The estate devolved to Gill upon his marriage to Sarah and he invested his resources in developing orchards, gardens, and the surrounding park such that the area became an asset to the town and redoubled his wealth. (Later, during the Revolution, Gill came to public prominence on the council of governors for the state, eventually rising to lieutenant governor in 1794 and acting governor for one year, just prior to his death). Sarah died in 1771 without child. The miniature of her husband seems to have passed through the English branch of the Gill family. Moses was descended from Michael Gill of Dover, a Copley portrait of whose wife, Relief Dowse—Moses's grandmother—now hangs in Tate Britain.

In 1773, Gill married Rebecca Boylston of the prominent Boston Boylstons, thus enhancing his landed status with considerable family prestige. The daughter of Sarah Morecock and Thomas Boylston, a prosperous importer whose fortunes multiplied in the

hands of his sons Nicholas and Thomas II, had sat for Copley, along with her mother and siblings in 1767. Her wedding brought her back to Copley for another portrait. By this time, he had stopped painting miniatures, but if by some chance he did concede to execute just one more for old time's sake, it is still out there, waiting to be discovered.

The author gratefully acknowledges the excellent scholarship of Erica Hirshler and Theresa Fairbanks. See Erica Hirshler, "Copley in Miniature" in Carrie Rebora and Paul Staiti, et al, *John Singleton Copley in America* (New York, 1995): 117–42, and Theresa Fairbanks, "Gold Discovered: John Singleton Copley's Portrait Miniatures on Copper" in *Yale University Art Gallery Bulletin* (1999): 75–91. @

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