



1773

Oil on ticking

61 5/8 x 48 inches (156.5 x 121.9 cm)

JOHN SINGLETON COBLEY
American

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LET'S LOOK

What are the people in this painting doing? How can you tell?

How might they be feeling and what could they be thinking about? What makes you think so?

What do you think the relationship between the man and woman might be? What do you see that makes you say that?

Where do you think the artist wanted us to look? How do you know?

What do you think the artist is telling us about each person's personality?

If these people could talk, what do you think they would say to each other? What do you think they would say to us?

PORTRAIT OF MR. AND MRS. THOMAS MIFFLIN (SARAH MORRIS)

The couple in this painting appears to be enjoying a relaxed moment at home, instead of posing for a formal portrait. However, this picture is far from a spontaneous snapshot of everyday life. In fact, everything—from the couple's clothing to their body language, facial expressions, and surroundings—has been carefully chosen to tell us about the sitters and what was important to them.

Philadelphiaans Thomas Mifflin (1744–1800) and his wife, Sarah Morris Mifflin (c. 1747–1790), were visiting Boston (see map) when they commissioned John Singleton Copley to paint their portrait. It was traditional in colonial America for a husband and wife to have separate portraits made, but here Thomas and Sarah appear in the same picture and sit very closely together. With a slight smile, Thomas turns toward Sarah and gazes admiringly at her. Their hands almost touch near the center of the painting. Through this physical closeness and visual connection, the artist communicated the couple's genuine affection for each other.

Thomas and Sarah's clothing conveys their wealth and status. Sarah's gray silk dress and sheer linen cap and apron are made of expensive fabrics. A beautiful corsage adorns her dress, and the black ribbon tied around her neck is in the latest style. Thomas wears a fine, well-fitting wool coat and breeches, and his natural hair (instead of a powdered wig) is fashionably informal. The Mifflins could have chosen more formal and elaborate clothing, perhaps of brightly colored or patterned fabric with expensive lace or decoration. However, it was becoming popular during this time to dress more casually. The Mifflins' clothing choices are also in keeping with their religious beliefs, since many wealthy Quakers like themselves chose to wear less elaborate, though high-quality, clothing. Their calm, composed facial expressions add to the sense

of modesty and self-restraint.

This portrait also tells us about the Mifflins' political beliefs. Thomas, who was a merchant, opposed the taxes that American colonists were required to pay on British goods. He protested these taxes by refusing to import products from England and encouraging other colonists to do the same. However, it is not Thomas but Sarah who sends a clear political message in this painting. She weaves her own decorative fringe, demonstrating her intention to boycott English goods and make her own instead. Using a loom, secured in place by a blue ribbon, Sarah weaves the threads with her right hand. The finished product is visible beneath her left hand. As a woman living in colonial America, she was prevented from holding public office, but her actions and confident look in this painting communicate her political sentiments.

In 1774, the year after this portrait was painted, Thomas attended the First Continental Congress, a meeting in Philadelphia in which delegates from the colonies discussed whether and how to resist British laws. He fought in the American Revolution (1775–83) and served directly under General George Washington. Mifflin held various positions in the Pennsylvania government, was a member of the Constitutional Convention in 1787, and was a signer of the United States Constitution. He is best remembered as the first governor of Pennsylvania after the colonies achieved independence.



Thomas and Sarah Mifflin lived in Philadelphia but traveled to other American cities, such as Boston and New York, to meet with other important colonial leaders. John Singleton Copley painted their portrait when they visited Boston in 1773. Copley lived and worked primarily in Boston before he moved to London permanently in 1774.

ABOUT THIS ARTIST

Born and raised in Boston, John Singleton Copley (1738–1815) was the son of poor Irish immigrants. He learned to draw by copying English prints and taught himself to paint. Copley was soon considered America's greatest artist and painted portraits of its wealthiest and most prominent citizens. A keen businessman, Copley knew how to satisfy his clients by creating portraits that

conveyed the messages they desired. His paintings were prized possessions, and people proudly placed them in their parlors, halls, and dining rooms.

Copley was a careful observer and made every detail in his paintings look as realistic as possible. For the portrait of the Mifflins, he asked Sarah to pose twenty times so that he could paint her hands accurately. He was so devoted to recording exactly what he saw that he often included features that might be considered imperfections, such as the scar on Thomas's forehead. Copley also became well-known for his ability to paint different textures. For example, notice the glistening tabletop and the reflection of the threads on its surface, as well as the folds of fabric on Sarah's dress and cap.

In the years leading up to the American Revolution, economic hardships and political tension hurt Copley's portrait business. Some colonists even suspected that he sympathized with the British; in fact, Copley's father-in-law owned the tea that was dumped into Boston Harbor during the Boston Tea Party of 1773. We do not know for certain how Copley felt about the political situation. He painted portraits of people on both sides of the growing conflict. Copley moved to London in 1774, where he continued his successful artistic career, and never returned to America.

BUY AMERICAN!

During the eighteenth century, American colonists imported many products from England including textiles, glass, and tea. To increase their revenue, the British government passed laws that placed extra taxes on many of these items. These laws included the Sugar Act (1764), the Stamp Act (1765), and the Townshend Acts (1767–70). Colonists, including Thomas Mifflin, protested these laws by organizing a series of non-importation agreements, or boycotts, in which people agreed not to buy any goods from England until the taxation policies changed.

PORTRAIT MINIATURES

Few Americans in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries could afford to have large oil portraits made as the Mifflins did. Miniatures, like the one shown here, were a popular and less expensive alternative. Painted with watercolor on ivory, miniatures were small and portable. This example, painted by James Peale (brother of artist Charles Willson Peale) features Maria Bassett, the daughter of Colonel Burwell Bassett, a close friend and relative of George Washington. Can you find a miniature within this miniature? Look closely at the gold chain around Maria Bassett's neck and you'll see a miniature pendant, which may be a portrait of her father.

Across the colonies, boycotts were important precursors to the American Revolution. The most effective and widespread boycott was organized in December 1774 by a group of representatives from twelve of the thirteen colonies known as the First Continental Congress. Imports from Britain dropped sharply the following year. The success of these boycotts demonstrated the impact that colonists could have when they worked together. These actions further stirred emotions on both sides of the conflict and fueled the tension that eventually led to the outbreak of war.

CONNECT AND COMPARE

Investigate who supported the colonists (and who did not) before and during the American Revolution. What factors contributed to their political positions?

Research women's roles in colonial America. What rights did women have? What rights were they denied? What roles did they serve in society? How did they contribute to politics, business, religion, and social action?

Copley painted the Mifflins' portrait when they were in Boston for a visit. Research how people traveled from Philadelphia to Boston in 1773. How long would it have taken for them to get there?

RELATED ART PROJECT

Create a portrait of someone that sends a message about who the person is and his or her beliefs. Whom will you choose? What is important to him or her? How will you symbolize that? What objects will you include in the picture? What are the person's unique characteristics? How will you convey those traits?



Portrait of Maria Bassett
1801
Watercolor on ivory
2 3/4 x 2 1/8 inches (7 x 5.4 cm)

JAMES PEALE
American

Bequest of Jane Barbour Charles,
1980, 1980-101-1

This object is included in Pennsylvania Art: From Colony to Nation, a set of teaching posters and resource book produced by the Division of Education and generously supported by the Sherman Fairchild Foundation, Inc.