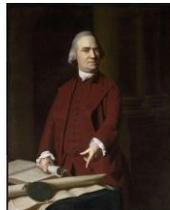


Art of the American Revolution Teaching Resources



Overview: Explore the art of colonial Boston. Students will look at objects made during the colonial period and learn how these historic artworks tell multiple stories about race, identity, and power during the time of the American Revolution.

Curriculum: The Arts, Visual Arts, Social Studies, U.S. History **Grade Range:** 3–8

Program Artworks:

- [Sons of Liberty Bowl](#), by Paul Revere, Jr., 1768 (49.45)
- [Samuel Adams](#), by John Singleton Copley, about 1772 (L-R 30.76c)
- [The Death of General Warren at the Battle of Bunker's Hill, 17 June, 1775](#), by John Trumbull, after 1815–before 1831 (1977.853)

Boston on the Eve of Revolution

Colonial Boston was far from a provincial town – it was a busy Atlantic port that played a major role within the global economy. Boston merchants had connections to both Europe and the Caribbean, importing raw materials – mahogany, silver, and sugar extracted by enslaved African and Native laborers in the Americas – and reselling them as finished luxury goods to privileged consumers. Members of this elite colonial class grew increasingly independent from the British government, but not from international trends: they sat for portraits dressed in Indian-inspired silks, poured Chinese tea from pots made of silver mined in Latin America, furnished their homes with mahogany harvested in Santo Domingo, and supported artists who based their

MFA Boston

work on British and European models. The elegant portraits in the MFA's colonial gallery depict some of the leaders of the American Revolution, yet also mask a more uncomfortable history. Although slaveholding and trading was in decline in Boston by the 1770s, many of the sitters in the portraits – including John Hancock, Peter Faneuil, Elizabeth Murray, and even the painter John Singleton Copley – were slaveholders. Beautiful works of art created in this period thus ironically relied on oppressive economic systems, raising questions about the notions of “liberty” that inspired their makers and patrons.

Translating American Stories

English is a foreign language in the Americas. Languages from Europe, Asia, and many other parts of the world come here through immigration, trade, and cross-cultural communications. To better tell the diverse stories about art made in the Americas, the MFA has begun to present gallery texts in multiple languages. In the colonial portraiture gallery, visitors will find labels in Spanish, Chinese, Haitian, Creole, and Portuguese – the most commonly spoken languages in Boston after English – as well as in Wabanaki, a Native language of this region. These labels are not translations of old information; instead, they offer new stories drawn from current scholarship and informed by the knowledge of a team of contributors, including community members.

Teaching Resources

[Paul Revere: Sons of Liberty Bowl](#)

Discover the story of Revere's most iconic creation, the *Sons of Liberty* bowl, bravely made and marked by the rebel and silversmith on the threshold of the Revolutionary War. Paperback, 56 pages. Available through the [MFA Shop](#).

[Colonial Silversmithing](#)

First, look at the MFA's portrait of [Paul Revere](#) and then watch craftsman Steve Smithers demonstrate colonial American silversmithing techniques. (1:15 video)

[Thomas Sully: George Washington and The Passage of the Delaware](#)

Learn how Thomas Sully's imagination, technique and ambition came together to embody the drama of the Revolution and the character of its leaders. Paperback, 64 pages. Available through the [MFA Shop](#).

[Behind the Scenes: The Passage of the Delaware Installed](#)

In this video, watch the unrolling and installation of the massive canvas by Thomas Sully, *The Passage of the Delaware*, as this mammoth painting took its place in the MFA's Art of the Americas Wing in 2010. (1:35 video)

[William Lee](#)

From the Mount Vernon website, learn more about George Washington's enslaved valet William Lee who is depicted in the MFA's *The Passage of the Delaware*.

Classroom Activity

The Empty Frame: Who is missing from the walls of the MFA?



[Mrs. James Warren \(Mercy Otis\)](#), 31.212

Colonial portraits showed people the way they *wanted* to be seen, but not always how they looked in real life. The artists who painted portraits wanted to show off their skill at depicting the shimmer of a satin dress or the softness of a curl of hair. For the wealthy white colonists who had portraits made, these paintings often marked significant events, like marriages. The paintings also showed their ideas of what prosperity and power looked like.

The Museum has placed an empty frame in the gallery of colonial portraiture to represent the many people in the Revolutionary period who were never portrayed in an oil painting. The people who are missing might have shown their values through different art forms, or perhaps they could not afford to commission an artist to paint a portrait.

Step 1: Have students turn and talk with a partner about why it is important for the MFA to include the empty frame in the gallery filled with colonial portraits.

Step 2: Assign students to research some of the people who are missing from the MFA's collection of colonial portraits. Start with the suggestions below and help us by adding to the list.



Crispus Attucks, a sailor of African and Natick Indian descent and the first Patriot to die in the war

Phillis Wheatley, the young West African woman enslaved in Boston who became an internationally acclaimed poet

Sachem Solomon Uhaunaunumut ("King Solomon"), who led Stockbridge Mohican soldiers against British forces in early Revolutionary battles

Elizabeth Freeman, whose lawsuit to gain her freedom from enslavement led the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court to outlaw slavery in 1781 in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts

Who else do you want to see on this list? Let us know at distancelearning@mfa.org.