



Smithsonian American Art Museum

April 2012



Robert Hooper

ca. 1770-1772

John Singleton Copley

Born: Boston, Massachusetts 1738

Died: London, England 1815

oil on canvas

50 x 10 in. (127.0 x 101.6 cm)

Smithsonian American Art Museum

Gift of Diane and Norman Bernstein

2006.12.1

[Collections Webpage and High Resolution Image](#)

John Singleton Copley depicted Robert Hooper surrounded by symbols that allude to his wealth, power and position in Colonial American society. Painted in the years just prior to the American Revolution, researcher Laura knew that investigating the life of the sitter would be the key to placing him in to the larger historical context of the American Revolution.

- **A large portion of Copley's American patrons were supporters of the British monarchy and its rule over the colonies. Is this the case with Robert Hooper? Was he involved in any of the politics in the Boston area during the pre-war years?**

To begin to answer this question, I first needed to learn about Hooper's life in greater detail. I searched genealogical websites for birth, death and marriage records for Hooper and his family. These records provided me with the necessary information that would assist me in finding answers to many of my questions. What I was able to learn was that Robert Hooper came from a family of financially successful and politically involved Loyalists; many of them having sat for portraits painted by Copley, including Hooper's father, step-mother, and several of his siblings. Hooper's father Robert 'King' Hooper owned the largest and most profitable shipping business in Marblehead, Massachusetts and as a result had a considerable amount of social and political

pull in the Boston-area. It was because of this affluence that Hooper and his family members could afford to have their portraits painted by Copley, the preeminent painter of his day.

In the course of my ensuing research, I discovered that Robert Hooper, his father Robert ‘King’ Hooper and two of his brothers were involved in Revolutionary-era activity. In 1774, the men lauded the performance of then-Governor Thomas Hutchinson in a public address on the occasion of Hutchinson leaving office and sailing back to England. Most Patriot colonists at the time had viewed Hutchinson’s performance in office deplorable and accused him of pushing a British agenda; he was identified as the main proponent of the British taxes on the colonies. The address was of course politically motivated; in the guise of a commendation of Hutchinson, the Marblehead merchants were really entreating King George III to see that they were not involved in the other colonist’s “treasonous” activities, so as to not have their businesses suffer from any future trade restrictions the king might enact on the colonies. The entire situation did not sit well with many colonists.

Through the Library of Congress, which has a great repository of broadsides and printed ephemera, I was able to obtain a copy of [the original recantation](#) the Hooper men were forced to make after their initial praise of the Governor had their Patriot neighbors in an uproar. Robert Hooper Jr.’s recantation reads as follows:

“Whereas I the Subscriber did some Time since sign an Address to Governour Hutchinson, which has given just Offence to my Town and Country: I now declare, that I had not the least Design to offend either, but at the Time of signing said Address I thought it might be of Service to my Town and Country, but finding that it has not had the desired Effect, I do now renounce said Address in all its Parts, and beg that my Town and Country would forgive the Error, and I now assure them that at all Times I have been, and still am ready to the utmost of my Power, to support and defend the just Rights and Liberties of my Town and Country with my Life and Fortune. Robert Hooper, Jun. Marblehead, May 1. 1775.”

Prior to their recantation, it seemed as if their only choice was to recant or be killed by an angry mob; a hypothesis confirmed by a catalogue of Harvard Graduates of the eighteenth-century. Apparently Robert Hooper’s brother Joseph did not recant and was forced to flee from an angry mob in the middle of the night on one of his father’s ships bound for Spain.

My research into the business ventures of ‘King’ Hooper led me to a great story which has significant contextual resonance within the story of the American Revolution. I first located pieces of the story in a book about the Marblehead shipping industry during the eighteenth-century, hoping to find some information on Robert Hooper. According to this book, in 1769 the sailors on one of ‘King’ Hooper’s ships, the *Pitt Packet*, were involved in an attempted press gang by the British Navy. The American sailors refused to cooperate with the British and in the ensuing scuffle, an American sailor killed a British naval officer with a harpoon to the throat. In

the resulting legal battle, *Rex v. Corbett*, America's second president John Adams, then a fledgling lawyer, was hired to defend the American sailor. Adams won the case by proving justifiable homicide. From previous research I knew that Adams was a prolific writer; to readers, his writings and letters illuminate his life in incredible detail. In a book of his letters, I was delighted to find that Adams had written about this case. He remembered the case warmly in his later years writing to a friend in 1816 that he believed the case to be more important than a more often remembered Revolutionary-era legal case, the Boston Massacre Trials. Despite his penchant for lengthy discourse, Adams unfortunately did not state his reasons as to why he believed the *Rex v. Corbett* case was more important so we are left to speculate.

As I am in the midst of my contextual research on this painting, my next step would be to locate more information on Robert Hooper. We know his father was a great businessman, but little is mentioned of the son from what I have found so far; then question then becomes "what happened to Hooper?" Additionally, I would like to explore the following question:

- **Can we make any other discoveries about Robert Hooper or the Hooper family that would help illuminate any other event or aspect of the American Revolution?**

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