The Fashionably Dressed Sailor: Another Look at the Black Figure in John Singleton Copley's *Watson and the Shark*

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Both Albert Boime and the late Guy McElroy recently published studies suggesting that the figure of the negro in John Singleton Copley's *Watson and the Shark* (Figure 1) involves political allegory. Boime's book was based on an article he wrote for *Smithsonian Studies in American Art* in which he focused on the works of Copley and Winslow Homer. In his article, Boime writes, "...Copley's picture demonstrates a Tory attempt to show sympathy for repressed people at the height of Tory antagonism towards the American Revolution."[1] McElroy supported this view in *Facing History* by adding, "...Copley's black figure...acts as an integral component of a dialogue that encompasses political intrigue."[2] Richard Dorment, in his review of Boime's book, convincingly argued that Boime refers to circumstances and ideas which were, at best, a passing concern to eighteenth century whites. Dorment writes, "from everything we know about Copley or Watson the moral issue of slavery did not concern them."[3] Therefore, there are important questions to be asked. What was the role of the negro in the eighteenth century urban communities of London, Boston and Havana? What does the presence of the negro in this painting seem to symbolize, and did the use of a negro figure in the painting of *Watson and the Shark* have anything to do with the politics of that time? I will first address these questions by summarizing what is known of the opinions this painter and his patron might have had during the years surrounding 1778. A brief description of the character of Copley and Watson will perhaps aid in the interpretation of this painting.[4]

John Singleton Copley (1738-1815) came from a middle class, merchant family in Boston, Massachusetts. He was able to elevate his economic and social standing through his talent as a portrait painter in Boston. At the age of thirty he married Susanna Clarke, the daughter of a prominent Tory businessman. Copley involved himself with the town politics of young, colonial Boston, as was expected of a man in his station.[5] His reputation of involvement increased his visibility and bolstered his business as a painter. Copley's political concern seemed to be with peace between the Colonies and Britain. His surviving letters make no mention of his having an opinion of or a concern with slavery. He owned a respectable piece of property in the Beacon Hill area where he was the neighbor of John Hancock.[6]

Ambition and an unsettled political climate in Boston aided Copley in his decision to study in Italy and then settle in England in 1775 to further pursue his career as an artist. He was a man of determination concerning his art. His letters, without fail, make reference to his work as a painter. The move to London did not change Copley's standard of living. As in America, appearances continued to hold great importance to him. He resided in neighborhoods with such notaries as the popular painter, Joshua Reynolds and the famous auctioneer, James Christie.[7] Although, there is evidence of his allegiance to the colonies, he chose the safer stand of neutrality once on foreign soil.[8] Copley's choice is understandable given his obligation to his new patrons in London (both Whigs and Tories) who graciously welcomed him into their circles. Choosing sides during such heated times could have proven fatal to his career. Given his temperament and his desire to establish a reputation in London, the likelihood that Copley intended to make a complicated socio/political statement through *Watson and the Shark*, as suggested by Boime, seems problematical. His patron, Brook Watson was a prominent, American-born, London-based businessman who had important nationalist acquaintances in America. It is said that he used his position among them to spy for the loyalist cause. Watson, a staunch Tory, had his livelihood implicated in the profits to be made by the slave trade.[9] Whether or not he dealt directly in the trade of flesh, or merely in the food stuffs sold to those who did, has been a topic of lively debate. We do know that his wealth was dependent on the continuation of the enterprise. Brook Watson frequented the ports of the Atlantic triangle as often as the parlors of the social elite. Watson must have possessed admirable oratory and political skills since he went on to become a member of Parliament. During his tenure in Parliament, he voted against the abolition of slavery.[10] There is little question as to his stand in this matter. It seems probable that Watson's stand was one taken with nothing more than economics in mind.

In 1773, Watson met the ex-slave writer, Phillis Wheatley, at a gathering given in her honor in London. As Lord Mayor of London, he presented her with a copy of the 1770 Glasgow folio edition of *Paradise Lost*. At the National Gallery in London, a painting of this event exists to this day.[11] Not only did Watson acknowledge the talents of this negro woman in a public setting but allowed this gesture to be immortalized for future generations. This could be a clue to Brook Watson's attitude towards the negro as an individual, seen in a totally different light from that of slavery's economic

gain. Watson, an orphan himself, bequeathed *Watson and the Shark* to Christ's Hospital, a London school dedicated to the education of poor children, because the painting "[held] out a most useful lesson to youth."[12] Historian Hugh Honour notes, that this statement gives definition to Watson's feelings about the artwork. He saw its message as adversity overcome against devastating odds, the result of "human courage and solidarity."[13] Not a particularly religious man, Watson had a spiritual bent that rose to the surface on occasion, as when he quoted poetry on the reverse of another painting with lines that speak to the nature and inherent heroism of man.[14]

Unfortunately, there is little written about how much influence Watson had on the overall composition of the painting in question. It has been suggested by McElroy that it was Watson who advised Copley that a negro was a member of the rescue team.[15] In 1778, Watson's incident with the shark was already twenty nine years past. There is no documented reference to the identity of any member of the rescue team. More than likely the decision to place *nine* sailors in the small boat was Copley's, establishing his primary control over the composition of the painting. Copley, having already settled on the arrangement of the composition, could have chosen to transform any of the sailors in the boat from white to black (Figure 2). The finished product not only has compositional balance but tonal balance, achieved in part, by the placement of the dark face at the top of the triangle of figures. There is little firm information about the relationship between Watson and Copley. The two are said to have met aboard ship during Copley's journey to England in 1774.[16] If so, it is safe to assume that Copley inquired about the loss of the leg and was introduced to the story of Watson's near death encounter with the shark in Havana Harbor. The story was more than likely repeated often because of its dramatic appeal and might have been heavily embellished at each telling. The historian, Marshall B. Davidson, refers to Watson as a friend of Copley.[17] No evidence was given for this presumption but the two men could have retained at least a business acquaintanceship. An unsigned portrait exists of Watson in his Parliamentary robes, as Lord Mayor of London, which has been attributed to Copley.[18]

Since this was a commissioned painting, the patron obviously dictated the basic content of the picture. Until the end of the eighteenth century few large pictures had been painted and virtually no statues carved without commissions. It is not until the beginning of the nineteenth century that we see evidence of artistic independence which allowed the financially stable artist to express his own sentiments through his work.[19]

As Copley's biographer Jules D. Prown put it, "[*Watson and the Shark*] was a topic of bizarre novelty rather than historical importance."[20] Additionally, there would have been no compelling reason to use a negro figure in its composition without such a request from the patron.

Copley made many preliminary sketches for this painting. As mentioned above, it is believed that Brook Watson, upon seeing a sketch of the composition, advised Copley that one of the crew members involved in the rescue was a negro. There was no reason to doubt the validity of the statement. The British were known to use negroes to pilot royal vessels in the coastal waters and negroes swelled the ranks of ordinary seamen.[21] In their work as seamen, blacks came into direct competition with British seamen. Governor Parry, stationed in Barbados in 1786, found it necessary to write to the Crown "...that the numbers of Negro Slaves employed in Navigating the Trading Vessels...seem to me to increase so much as to require the attention of the British Legislature, as it throws so many English seamen out of employment."[22] Additionally, it is not so surprising to find the negro in the ranks of seafaring men. The role of the sailor has historically been dictated by strict laws which were not unlike those written to keep the slave in line. George II passed a statute in 1729, upon which the later U.S. statute of 1790 was modeled, which provided for the apprehension and punishment by imprisonment for the desertion of a sailor.[23] A life of physical discomfort faced both the able seaman of the eighteenth century as well as the plantation slave. At the master's disposal twenty-four hours a day, a slave or a seaman faced the added possibility of life-threatening disaster at the hand of Mother Nature.[24]

Watson and the Shark represented not only Copley's first "history painting" but also his first negro figure. Thus the inclusion of a negro would have posed new technical problems for the artist. Of all the preparatory work done for this canvas, the negro apparently received the singular, finished oil study done in 1777 (Figure 3). Copley's need to work from life is assurance that the figure is a portrait of someone available to pose in his London studio. This oil study, according to Prown, was referred to as "Head of a Favorite Negro" when sold at auction in 1864. Hugh Honour writes that the negro "was in all probability a servant brought over by the Copley family from Boston."[25] This is disputable since Prown has documented the passage from Marblehead, Massachusetts having included only "Mrs. Copley, the three oldest children and a maid."[26] There is no concrete evidence that Copley had exposure to blacks in his every day home life.

The idea that Watson might have been cunning enough to use the painting to display his feelings concerning the then current fight for freedom by the Colonies is, of course, possible. But, the probability that a black crew member was present softens the possible political edge that this picture has been reputed to possess by Boime and McElroy. The reviews given the picture at the time of its first showing in 1778 at the Royal Academy do not in any way allude to such political "messages." Therefore, if such messages were intended we at least know that they were not noticed by the critics who would have been the first to reveal this type of content. The painting received rave reviews. *The Morning Chronicle* on April 25, 1778 mentions the negro figure as "a fine index of concern and horror."[27] I could find no evidence among references by scholars in eighteenth century documents concerning this painting that convinced me that the negro's presence was unorthodox for the period. Therefore, the negro seaman would

not serve as an effective political symbol.

Copley's *Watson and the Shark* is among one of the few grand paintings of the eighteenth century to contain a black image. It is an "integrated" painting devoid of any reference to the social division of the races in its title or its composition. It is documented that the common able seaman was a lower class citizen. In England, they were once ordinary fisherboys, illiterate and struggling for mere survival. In order to glorify the existence of negro sailors as unusual for the time, one would have to take them out of historical context to make an effective political statement.

Copley's picture was not the first painting with black images to be shown at The Royal Academy. In 1777, one year earlier, Agostino Brunias exhibited *A Sunday Negro's Market in the Island of Dominica* which created a somewhat sterilized vision of the negro slave community in the West Indies.[28] The present location of this painting is unknown but examples of Brunias' style do survive: a negro group alone and at leisure, thus making no statement vis-a-vis placement in the social structure of the slaveholder society. Indeed, it is not clear in the painting's conception that these people were slaves at all. The viewer is faced with a pleasant gathering of clean, well-dressed, merry negroes. This unrealistic treatment of the negro slave subject in art is typical of most of the eighteenth century. It is within the final decade of the century that depiction of slavery was used as propaganda to promote its abolition, as seen in George Morland's *Execrable Human Traffick* of 1789 (Figure 4). Since Watson was not an advocate of the abolition of slavery, it is unlikely that he would have drawn attention to the issue in this manner. The artist who had actually seen the horrifying plight of the negro slave in the New World would not advance in his career had he chosen to immortalize such subject matter on canvas in an attempt to gain patronage. Prior to the emergence of the abolitionist movement, fine art using the black image was limited to such fanciful pictures as Brunias' and the few portraits where slaves were incorporated into the composition just as a favorite vase or piece of furniture would have been. As the moral issue of slavery became a prominent question in the fight for independence between Britain and America, slaveholding became something of a sore subject to the eighteenth century aristocrat. What was once a status symbol as seen in portraits like John Hesselius' *Charles Calvert* of 1761 (Figure 5) became less common as the abolitionist campaign accelerated in the later years of the century. Therefore, the few black images undertaken during these turbulent times did not attempt to portray the negro as they truly existed on the plantations. No commissioned eighteenth century picture documents the true condition of a negro slave. What we have surviving today is a glorified impression of a group of appreciative black natives. The acceptance of fine art as a method of accurately recording current history was still in its infancy. If rendered in a naturalistic state, the slave would first and foremost represent oppression, an image unsuitable for the parlors of those who patronized art. It is also important to note that of the numerous portraits painted by Copley on both continents, not one included a negro servant.

The black individual was a rare sight in Britain prior to the huge economic success of the slave trade. Blacks had been simply identified as Africans. Several Africans were exotic functionaries in the courts of Europe—"part of the colorful decor of princely magnificence."[29] In Britain, mass opinion about the abolition of slavery began in the 1780s and peaked with the campaigns of 1788, 1792, and 1814.[30] It was in the late eighteenth century as well, that sugar became a high demand product. As the demand for sugar increased, so did the demand for African slave labor to work the plantations of the West Indian colonies. This was the cause of what is known as the Atlantic Triangle between Britain, Africa, and the West Indies. Some statistics concerning the negro presence in Britain, Cuba, and America during the mid to late eighteenth century will aid in our understanding of the degree of familiarity Copley, Watson, and those like them, might have experienced. This will also place the black crewman in *Watson and the Shark* in perspective.

The life of an urban negro in Boston was drastically different from that of the negro on the rural plantation. Throughout the entire colonial era in Massachusetts, Boston claimed the largest number of negroes in 1752 representing one tenth of the population.[31] Boston, with six percent of the white population of Massachusetts in 1765, contained fifteen percent of the colony's slaves.[32] Ownership of slaves during the eighteenth century in Boston was universal among the urban elite and commonplace among the middle classes as well.[33] Further, in the North, slavery did not develop on a large scale "for the thin soil and harsh climate did not permit the plantation system of agriculture." Blacks were found in every occupation from printing to cabinetmaking. They helped to build New England ships that engaged in fishing, whaling, trading, and were employed in manning them as well.[34] Economically, the free negroes of New England were discriminated against, often limiting their employment to unskilled labor, except for the seaman.[35] "The black seaman was a common sight in colonial New England, and in some cases, nearly half of the whaling crews were Negroes."[36] This information becomes very interesting when we look at *Watson and the Shark* and see the harpoonist at work. The harpoon is most commonly used on whaling vessels. On whaling ships in particular, as early as 1806, black men "...more or less have been in command of vessels without any intermission. These sailors, regardless of color, stood on equal grounds as to their ability to rise through the ranks onboard ship."[37] The status of the negro seaman was unlike that of any other occupation at the time. Watson would not have been surprised to see a negro involved in his rescue. The negro sailor should have been a common sight to him involved, as he was, in trade and in his familiarity with the ports of several cities.

In London, it was fashionable in the eighteenth century to keep a black servant; they were regarded with "amusement" by most people.[38] The prejudices in England, at this time, were primarily those concerning social rank. A

servant was low-status, black or white. Negroes were introduced into London as slaves by the American and West Indian planters. Unable to contain the influx of slaves into the city, Lord Mansfield declared in 1772 that there would be no slavery in England and that any bondsman setting foot in the country was automatically free.[39] This should not be confused with the acceptance of slavery in the British colonies which flourished until 1833. Slavery, to the urban elite of both London and Boston, was an issue which concerned them, at best, on a moral/spiritual level. The abolition of slavery meant they would have to employ rather than own their negro servants and laborers. It did not represent the devastating losses that the plantation owners envisioned at the same time. That Copley had servants is indisputable. Whether any of his servants were black is not known. Because Copley traveled in elitist circles, it is probable that he encountered negroes in the homes of his friends and neighbors. What appears as unorthodox about Copley's painting, to the modern viewer, is that he made no reference to the social placement of his black figure, something we have become accustomed to seeing in works dated during African slavery. Boime describes this figure as "an exotic servant who awaits his master's next move."[40] He seems to suggest that the fourteen year old, drowning "patron" Watson, was giving commands to his black servant. Which other figure in this composition could be considered a master? As a seaman in his element, the negro in *Watson and the Shark* was equal to his mates in the boat and a distinction between them because of color was unnecessary.

The final area in this discussion is Havana Harbor, Cuba, the setting for our painting. Copley did not visit Cuba to create his background. Prown has shown that Copley used a print to depict the harbor accurately. In his inquiries he might have asked about the sailors to be found there. The ratio of free people of color to slaves in Cuba in 1787 was 1:1.7.[41] Writers on slavery in Cuba contend that the urban slave lived with far more freedom and money than their rural counterparts. Despite the fact that "the sugar industry was one of the prime importers of African slaves after 1800, the overwhelming bulk of the negroes on Cuba neither lived nor worked on the great sugar plantations during the entire period of Cuban slavery."[42] The Latin American slave codes were far more lenient in comparison to those in America. The African slave was treated as a human being and enjoyed the basic rights of marriage, parenthood and family life. There is no concrete way to identify the sailors who plucked Brook Watson out of Havana Harbor as locals, European or American. With the exception of the harpoonist, all the figures appear dressed in like attire highlighting further the appearance of equality among them. Close inspection of the sleeves on the figures leaning out of the boat and the oarsman in the forefront reveal the comparable quality of type and construction to the garment of the negro. I mention the attire of the seamen in this painting because both Boime and McElroy use the idea of the negro being "more fashionably dressed" to support their argument that he has a special meaning and role in the painting. They cite that the figure is uncharacteristically attired and placed in the composition to draw attention to his use as a political symbol.[43] But according to Franklin Knight, slaves in the city generally dressed in the styles of the whites.[44] The sight of a "fashionably dressed" negro in Havana was, therefore, not a sight to cause heads to turn. Prior to 1884, when a man went to sea he carried most equipment with him; "a suit of oil clothes, flannel shirt or guernsey frock, sea boots."[45] When Fredrick Douglas escaped to the north in 1838, he did so disguised as a sailor. He writes, "In my clothing I was rigged out in sailor style. I had on a red shirt and a tarpaulin hat and black cravat tied in sailor fashion, carelessly and loosely about my neck."[46] Douglas goes on to describe his passage mentioning the favorable treatment he received because of the respect that was given to a man of the sea. Admittedly, this event took place almost a century after the one in question, but I would suggest that such respect did not happen over night especially in relation to the negro. I do not find it convincing to describe Copley's sailor as overdressed for this scene.

The black crewman in *Watson and the Shark* is on equal ground with the white crewmen. It is tempting to read meanings into so grand a picture as this one. The impact of the painting, given its size and naturalistic rendering of a life-threatening situation, is unavoidably spiritual leading to introspection on the part of the viewer. I do not believe that there are any underlying issues at play here. The painting is not in need of any effort to bring out its meaning, nor does it require the societal ranking of its figures. It reminds the viewer of how man can be rendered helpless by the ravages of nature. To carry *Watson and the Shark* into the realm of political commentary is a modern idea. Richard Dorment commented in his review that doing this would reduce this outstanding work of art to "a minor painting, a glorified political cartoon." With this, I could not agree more.

Aside from the drama at hand, *Watson and the Shark* should be seen as a somewhat stylized but realistic rendering of one of the roles negroes played in eighteenth-century life, a role which, even if only when at sea, put them on equal ground with the whites. The depictions of blacks that were to follow this one do exemplify the inequitable treatment of these people, setting them socially apart from whites; but it is neither fair nor necessary to question the basic intent of a work of art in view of those which follow it from the hands of different artists. Copley went on to paint *Death of Major Pierson* (Figure 6) during 1782-84 and again gave his black figure individual identity and dignity. If historical fact did not tell us that this figure was the servant of Major Pierson, present and active during the struggle, we would be forced to accept him as something more. Documented fact has kept this picture free of modern speculation which is exactly what has clouded the intended message of *Watson and the Shark*.

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[1] Albert Boime, "Blacks in Shark-Infested Waters," *Smithsonian Studies in Art* 3 (Winter 1989): 31.

2 Guy McElroy, *Facing History: The Black Image in American Art, 1710-1940* (Washington, D.C.: Bedford Arts, 1990) 6.

3 Richard Dorment, "Painting the Unpaintable," rev. of *The Art of Exclusion*, by Albert Boime, *The New York Review of Books* 27 Sept. 1990: 54.

4 Basic biographical information can be found in Jules D. Prown, Vol. I & II.

5 Richard Klayman, *America Abandoned, John Singleton Copley's American Years, 1738-1774* (Maryland:University Press of America, 1983) 68.

6 Jules D. Prown, *John Singleton Copley*, 2 vols. (Massachusetts: Cambridge, 1966) 1: 62.

7 Prown 2: 259.

8 Prown 1: 86-87.

9 William Dunlap, *History of the Rise and Progress of the Arts of Design in the United States*, 2nd ed., 3 vols. (New York: C. E. Goodspeed & Co., 1918) 1: 133.

10 Dunlap 134.

11 Edward Scobie, *Black Britannia* (Illinois:Johnson Publishing Co., 1972) 88.

12 John C. Webster, *Sir Brook Watson, Friend of the Loyalists* (New Brunswick: Mt. Allison University, 1924) 13-14.

13 Hugh Honour, *The Image of the Black in Western Art*, 4 vols. (New York: William Morrow & Co., Inc., 1989) 4: 39.

14 Webster 9.

15 McElroy 6.

16 T. W. McSpadden, *Famous Painters of America* (New York: 1926) 56.

17 Marshall B. Davidson, *History of the Artists' America* (New York: 1973) 41.

18 Frank W. Bayley, *The Life and Works of John Singleton Copley* (Massachusetts: 1915) 254.

19 Honour 15.

20 Prown 2: 268.

21 Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro in the Making of America* 3rd edition (New York: Collier Books, 1987) 56.

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25 Honour 38.

26 Prown 1: 93.

27 Prown 2: 267.

28 Honour 32.

29 Honour 27-30.

30 James Walvin, *Slavery and British Society 1776-1846* (London: Macmillian, 1982) 24.

31 Philip S. Foner, *History of Black Americans* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1975) 247.

32 Ronald Hoffman and Ira Berlin, *Slavery and Freedom in the Age of the American Colonies* (Virginia: UP of Virginia, 1983) 6.

33 Hoffman 44.

34 Quarles 39.

35 Foner 255.

36 Foner 247.

37 Philip S. Foner and Ronald L. Lewis, *The Black Worker to 1869* (Pennsylvania: Temple UP, 1978) 207-208.

38 Rosamond Bayne-Powell, *Eighteenth Century London Life* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1938) 327.

39 Bayne-Powell 326.

40 Boime 32.

41 Eric Williams, *From Columbus to Castro: The History of the Caribbean 1492-1969* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1970) 190.

42 Herbert S. Klein, *Slavery in the Americas; A Comparative Study of Virginia and Cuba* (Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 1967) 151.

43 Boime 22 and McElroy 6.

44 Franklin W. Knight, *Slave Society in Cuba* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1970) 61.

45 Taylor 25.

46 Foner and Lewis 49.

Figure 1. John Singleton Copley, *Watson and the Shark,* 1778, oil on canvas, 71 3/4" x 90 1/2", National Gallery of Art, Washington; Ferdinand Lammont Belin Fund.

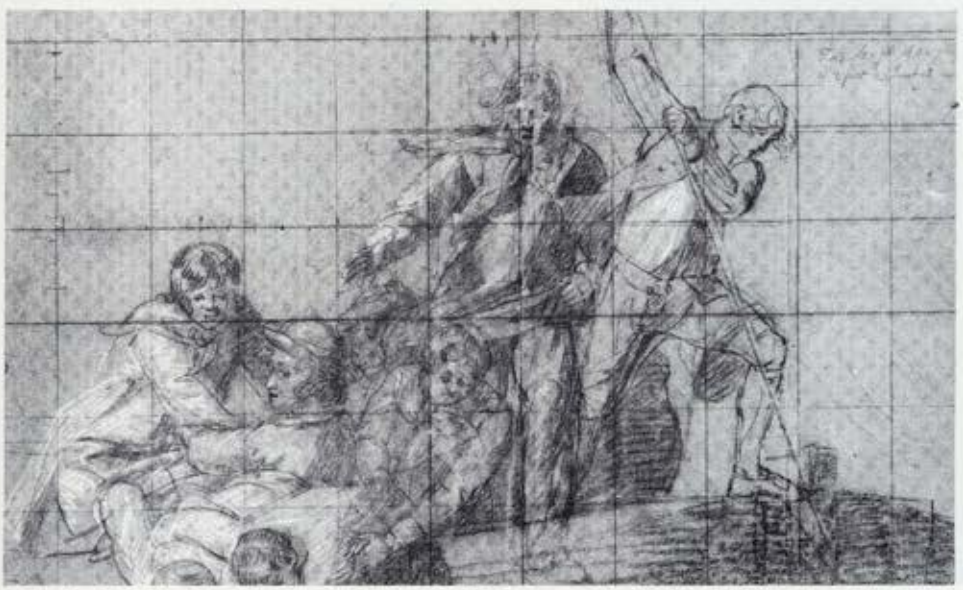

Figure 2. John Singleton Copley, *Eight Men,* 1777-78, charcoal and chalk, 9 3/4" x 11 7/8", Detroit Institute of Arts, City of Detroit Purchase.

Figure 3. John Singleton Copley, *Head of a Negro,* 1777-78, oil on canvas, 21" x 16 1/4", Founders Society Purchase, Gibbs-Williams Fund, Detroit Institute of Art.

Figure 4. George Morland, *Execrable Human Traffick or The Affectionate Slaves,* replica of 1788 version, oil on canvas, 1789, 33 1/2" x 48", Menil Foundation Collection, Houston.

Figure 5. John Hesselius, *Charles Calvert*, 1761, oil on canvas, 50 1/4" X 40 1/4", The Baltimore Museum of Art, gift of Alfred R. and Henry G. Riggs in memory of General Lawrason Riggs.

Figure 6. John Singleton Copley, *Death of Major Pierson*, 1782-84, oil on canvas, 99" x 144", The Tate Gallery, London.