

## John Singleton Copley

John Singleton Copley (1738–1815) was born in Boston. His stepfather was an artist, and unlike many of his peers in the colonies, Copley grew up surrounded by prints and paintings. He studied the art of the master portrait painters of the Renaissance and became one of the most renowned painters in the Colonies and well known in England as well. He was known for a realism and what the great English painter Joshua Reynolds called "hard detail." *Watson and the Shark* depicts a historical event, an attack on 14-year-old Brooks Watson in Havana Harbor in 1749, while he was serving onboard his uncle's trading ship. The shark attacked twice, severing Watson's foot, but the crew fought off the animal

successfully. Watson led a full life afterward, becoming Lord Mayor of London. The story was famous when Copley retold it in painting.

## *Watson and the Shark*



*Watson and the Shark* (1778), John Singleton Copley. Oil on canvas, overall: 182.1 x 229.7 cm (71 11/16 x 90 7/16 in.) framed: 241.3 x 264.2 x 10.1 cm (95 x 104 x 4 in.) Ferdinand Lamot Belin Fund 1963.6.1. Courtesy National Gallery of Art, Washington

[1778]

### Read

1. Locate the painting on the Internet and describe how color contributes to the effect?
2. What images strike your eye first? What details contribute to your overall sense of the painting?
3. What might be a purpose for artistically rendering a popular narrative, as the story of Brooks Watson's attack was?
4. How do the individual characters in the boat and the one out of it suggest a theme or message of the painting?

### Write

1. Write a paragraph that describes elements in the painting that make it feel heroic.
2. Comment on any techniques you observe that make the painting dynamic.

### Connect

1. Write a narrative that explains the details in the painting. Give it a beginning and an ending.
2. Why do you think this painting might have been so popular?