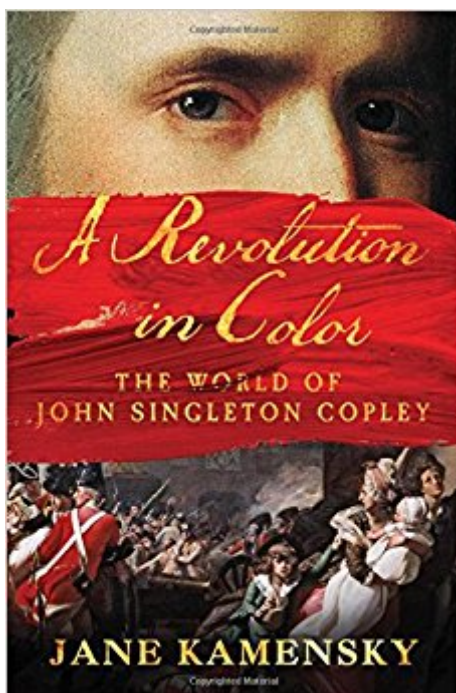


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A Revolution In Color: The World Of John Singleton Copley



Synopsis

This bold new history recovers an unknown American Revolution as seen through the eyes of Boston-born painter John Singleton Copley. Boston in the 1740s: a bustling port at the edge of the British empire. A boy comes of age in a small wooden house along the Long Wharf, which juts into the harbor, as though reaching for London thousands of miles across the ocean. Sometime in his childhood, he learns to draw. That boy was John Singleton Copley, who became, by the 1760s, colonial America's premier painter. His brush captured the faces of his neighbors—ordinary men like Paul Revere, John Hancock, and Samuel Adams—who would become the revolutionary heroes of a new United States. Today, in museums across America, Copley's brilliant portraits evoke patriotic fervor and rebellious optimism. The artist, however, did not share his subjects' politics. Copley's nation was Britain; his capital, London. When rebellion sundered Britain's empire, both kin and calling determined the painter's allegiances. He sought the largest canvas for his talents and the safest home for his family. So, by the time the United States declared its independence, Copley and his kin were in London. He painted America's revolution from a far shore, as Britain's American War. An intimate portrait of the artist and his extraordinary times, Jane Kamensky's *A Revolution in Color* masterfully reveals the world of the American Revolution, a place in time riven by divided loyalties and tangled sympathies. Much like the world in which he lived, Copley's life and career were marked by spectacular rises and devastating falls. But though his ambivalence cost him dearly, the painter's achievements in both Britain and America made him a towering figure of both nations' artistic legacies. 8 pages of color; 50 illustrations

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Customer Reviews

“Far from a born partisan, Copley could have gone either way. Kamensky’s great accomplishment is to leave readers pulled by different audiences, demands, and political allegiances right along with him.” - Caitlin Fitz, *The Atlantic*

“A memorable journey into the transatlantic world in the age of revolution through a close study of the greatest colonial American artist. Kamensky, a historian with an art historian’s sensibility, provides a brilliant survey of John Singleton Copley’s life, work, and subjects, vivified by a detailed examination of letters, diaries, and official records, many previously untapped, to involve the reader in the emotional and sensory experience of living in those tumultuous times.” - Jules Prown, Yale University

“Vivid, intimate, and richly detailed, Jane Kamensky’s biography of John Singleton Copley illuminates the deeply intertwined worlds of America and England at the moment of their violent divorce. The career of the great painter from Boston provides a wonderfully fresh and surprising perspective on the American Revolution, on the scope of artistic ambition, and on the high costs of divided loyalty.” - Stephen Greenblatt, author of *The Swerve*

“Jane Kamensky has not only crafted a stunning biography but also a truly singular account of the American Revolution. *A Revolution in Color* masterfully unravels any easy distinctions between patriots and loyalists.” - Amanda Foreman, author of *The World Made by Women*

“The greatest American artist of the eighteenth century, John Singleton Copley, preferred life in Britain, escaping from the bitter civil war that we call the American Revolution. In this brilliantly insightful and lucidly written biography, Jane Kamensky reveals the age of revolution in fresh new tones as complex and compelling as the interplay of light and shade in the finest Copley painting.” - Alan Taylor, author of *American Revolutions*

“A pleasure to read from first page to last, Jane Kamensky’s exploration of the life, work and tumultuous times of John Singleton Copley is itself a masterpiece. Like all excellent portraitists, Kamensky probes deeply into the character of her subject, as deft with the small, revealing detail as she is with the sweeping strokes of landscape and setting. Both gripping narrative history and insightful art criticism, *A Revolution in Color* is a genre-busting tour de force.” - Geraldine Brooks, author of *The Secret Chord*

“Beautifully written and elegant, *A Revolution in Color* gives us a vibrant and new perspective on the conflict between America and Great Britain, a conflict the ambitious John

Singleton Copley embodied. Jane Kamensky enriches our understanding of this vital time in world history. - Annette Gordon-Reed, author of "Most Blessed of the Patriarchs" - "Richly resourced, prismatic, dynamic, factually and psychologically revelatory, and ebulliently spiked with political insights and ironies, Kamensky's biography provides an intimate view of the American Revolution and its immediate aftermath as seen through the "acute, penetrating" gaze of a masterful artist. - Donna Seaman, Booklist (starred) - "There may never be a better biography of Copley than this sumptuous, exquisitely told story of a man and his time. - Kirkus Reviews (starred)

Jane Kamensky is a professor of history at Harvard University and the faculty director of the Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study. Her many books include *The Exchange Artist*, a finalist for the George Washington Book Prize.

This book is written in a style that I can only describe as affected and long-winded. Ms. Kamensky begins a sentence in modern English only to make her point by finishing with a direct quote from an 18th century source. She uses this technique throughout the book. The blending of two forms of English results in a presentation that - in my opinion - is mannered and verbose, detracting from an otherwise fascinating period in American history, not to mention one's reading pleasure. This book is best skimmed. For an engaging account of this period in Boston history, Esther Forbes's Pulitzer Prize-winning "Paul Revere and the World He Lived In" would be my suggestion. Better yet, go on a Boston By Foot tour.

This is just a wonderful book well deserving of its many plaudits. In one book, the reader benefits from a combined biographical, historical, and artistic examination of the famous early American artist John Singleton Copley (1738-1815). Because Copley fled to Europe and Britain shortly before the Declaration of Independence, the book maintains a helpful dual focus. The reader learns about Copley's successful struggle to become an important colonial artist, as well as his later massive success in London as an established giant figure much like his fellow American compatriot Benjamin West. In order to explain all this, the author educates the reader about the primitive state of American art and painting prior to the revolution, where supplies were scarce and customers even more so. One learned if he were lucky like Copley from established artists, such as his stepfather, since there was no artistic community supporting training institutions. Ah, but London

was heaven, as the author explains, the central point for a vast and fervid community interested in painting (and engravings) and willing to support it. Copley spends the rest of his life in London, having fled the tumultuous conditions in Boston just before the outbreak of the Revolution. He ascends to the top of the London painters, but in his final years slips back down into insolvency and the waning of his artistic skills. So this is superior biography written by a master historian--but it is so much more. For one thing, the book also is an outstanding history of Copley and his times. Living in Boston for the period just prior to the revolution, the book focuses upon how the revolutionary spirit spread, the British harshness toward the colonies, and the toll it took on individuals such as Copley whose father-in-law was a prominent and wealthy tea merchant. Copley literally had to flee to escape all the abuse and threats his family faced. The reader really gets a sense of the dangerous chaos that afflicted Boston during this period. It is a side of the revolution that we seldom read about in the history books, but one that is essential to understanding what was occurring. The third facet of the book, the artistic, was the one I was least familiar with. Have no concerns that this is a treatise on pictures, though the author does discuss a number of Copley's major works, or an art tutorial. Rather, art is the background for all that is happening to Copley, and the author supplies the setting that helps the reader understand the artistic dimensions of Copley's life. I was particularly interested as the author explained that during this period, a prospective colonial artist had to go to Europe, and especially Italy, to complete his preparation. A number of Copley's paintings are discussed in the course of detailing his biography. Many pictures are reproduced in black and white and place right into the narrative; there is also an extensive full color section with magnificent reproductions of some key paintings that well illustrate his mastery of color. I happen to love Copley's paintings, including his early American efforts, so learning about his work was a great bonus of enjoyment for me. So the triple focus of the book greatly enhances its impact. An author who has mastered this approach, and successfully integrated all the threads into one effective narrative, is to be commended as this Harvard historian has been. The amount of research reflected in the text and the 89 pages of notes bespeak of an excellent command of the material. And of great importance is the fact that the author writes beautifully, inviting the reader to come in and share much of what she knows about Copley, his life, travails and artistic contributions. Just a more than first-class effort by Professor Jane Kamensky, who has pulled off this difficult challenge with unbelievable skill and dedication.

I think the book was excessively padded and poorly constructed, but then I do not read a lot of biographies; it's quite possible that they are all like this. (Actually a recent bio of Abigail Adams

taught me a great deal about road conditions in Washington.) I thought the book -- given the title -- would be about radical changes in painting. Instead, it is a book in what little is known of Copley drowns in the staggering amount we know about that time period. I really am put off by the "and he could have known" and "he could have gone to" style of biographical analysis.

Jane Kamesky's well-written biography of the "American" painter John Singleton Copley nicely weaves political and social history with biographical facts that are available, putting the artist in the context of his time, particularly the period we call the American Revolution, and its immediate aftermath. That reminds me of Kamensky's effort to explain the various threads pulled together by the title. She didn't do it for me, but no matter. I expect one of the publisher's marketing gurus came up with the title. Copley was obviously a talented painter, but he was not so good on the personal relations side and he was a terrible businessman -- those two failings hurt him a lot. During his time he was recognized as a prominent painter, but not, sufficiently, to his satisfaction. Better recognition came after his death. There are other books that cover Copley's life (including the recently published "Of Arms and Artists," by Paul Staiti), but I do not hesitate to recommend this book for anyone interested in early American art history. (I also highly recommend the Staiti book, which is about Copley and other American Revolutionary war era artists.)

Great biography of one of America's greatest artists! I am a museum docent and found the information helpful for creating a tour. Also, it's beautifully written, well-researched, and contains many interesting facts about the American Revolution. My book discussion group is going to read it.

This biography of Copley, the great American painter, uses his life and work in pre-Revolutionary Boston and in post-Revolutionary London as the framework of the political and social history of the first American civil war. With deep research, critical appraisal, and warm style, Prof. Kamensky puts the history of art to work alongside the history of peoples on both sides of the Atlantic.

Fascinating study of Copley, giving wonderful aspects of the world in which he lived and worked; the context of the history and development of both Boston and the Revolutionary content are fascinating!! A very gifted writer of great intelligence researched this artist and historic era in an outstanding fashion!

Well researched and full of interesting information about the artist. I have a degree in art history yet

there was a lot I learned about Copley I hadn't learned in school. The artist does a good job of offering first person accounts about the Revolutionary War that are often overlooked, in particular the people who called out the hypocrisy of slave owners demanding freedom for all. I recommend this book to anyone interested in early American history and early American art history.

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