

UNIT 3: PAUL REVERE



PREVIEW THE ARTWORK

What is your first impression or emotional response to this artwork? (Consider mood, tone, or feeling before analyzing details)

What questions or ideas come to mind immediately? (About the subject, artist, or technique)

LEARN ABOUT THE ARTWORK

PAUL REVERE

Artist: John Singleton Copley **Original Location:** Museum of Fine Arts, Boston
Year: c. 1768–1770 **Medium:** Oil on canvas **Style:** Colonial American

Before Paul Revere became the legendary rider shouting, "The British are coming!", he was simply a skilled craftsman working long hours in a small shop in Boston.

In the years before the American Revolution, Revere earned his living as a **silversmith**—someone who shaped, engraved, and polished precious metal into beautiful objects people used every day.

This portrait of him, created by the American painter **John Singleton Copley**, captures Revere not as a hero of history, but as an ordinary man in the middle of his work. And yet, the more you look at the painting, the more extraordinary it becomes.

STEP INTO THE SCENE

Imagine walking into Revere's workshop around 1768.

The room would have smelled faintly of metal and warm beeswax. The walls would be lined with tools—hammers, burins, files—waiting for the next job. A single window might cast a beam of afternoon light across the table, catching the shine of silver.

Copley doesn't show the whole workshop; instead, he focuses on **Revere himself**, bringing you close, almost shoulder-to-shoulder, with the man at work.

Revere sits dressed not as a wealthy gentleman, but as a **working artisan**:

- a **plain white shirt** with soft, rolled-up sleeves,
- a dark green vest,
- arms relaxed,
- tools laid out in front of him.

This choice was unusual— most portraits of the time showed people in their finest clothes. But here, Copley invites you to see the *real* Revere: confident, thoughtful, and skilled.

COPLEY'S MASTERY: VALUE, LIGHT & SHADOW

This month you are studying **Value and Shading**, and this painting is one of the most famous examples of how artists use light to create depth and realism.

Notice how Copley uses **strong contrast** between light and dark:

- The **black background** makes Revere's face and shirt glow.
- The **white fabric** has so many folds and shadows that it almost feels touchable.
- The silver teapot reflects soft highlights, proving Copley studied how real light hits metal.

This is called **chiaroscuro**— a technique of using dramatic light and shadow to give a subject a three-dimensional look. Even though the painting is flat, Revere appears rounded, solid, and real because of how carefully Copley shaded every curve and surface.

When you observe the painting, notice the **range of values**— from the deepest blacks to the brightest whites— and how those values guide your eye to the most important parts of the scene.

COLOR & COMPOSITION CHOICES

Even the limited color palette is intentional. Copley uses mostly neutral colors:

- white shirt
- warm brown tabletop
- dark vest
- muted background

This lets the **silver teapot** and Revere's **face and hands** stand out as focal points. The red warmth in Revere's cheeks suggests he's been working, thinking, and engaged— not posing stiffly.

Copley also uses careful composition:

- Revere is placed **slightly off-center** to add interest.
- His elbow and the tools create a **gentle diagonal line** leading your eye to the teapot.
- His hand under his chin forms a **triangular shape**, a classical compositional tool for stability and focus.

All these choices help tell the story of who Paul Revere was at this moment in history.

A PORTRAIT INTERRUPTED

Many people notice that Revere's pose looks like he has paused mid-task. His tools—engraver's burins—lie on the table, ready to be picked up again.

In his hands is a **brand-new silver teapot** he was working on, and Copley paints it so meticulously that you can see tiny reflections in the metal.

Was he polishing it? Inspecting it? Admiring his craftsmanship?

Copley doesn't tell you.

He leaves room for **you** to interpret.

Revere's thoughtful expression suggests he is a thinker as well as a worker. This is important historically because Revere did become deeply involved in the growing resistance against British taxation. This very teapot may even reference the tea taxes that helped spark the American Revolution.

WHY THIS PORTRAIT MATTERS

At the time this painting was made, Revere was not yet a famous patriot. He was a respected artisan, husband, and father. Copley—who would later leave America for Europe—was fascinated by the dignity of everyday people and wanted to show the intelligence and value of working hands.

This portrait has become one of the greatest early American paintings because it captures the spirit of a man who would soon help shape a nation—not through wealth or aristocracy, but through conviction, craftsmanship, and courage.

AS YOU OBSERVE...

While you study this painting for your packet, consider:

- Where do you see the **brightest highlights** and **deepest shadows**?
- How does the **light source** affect the mood of the painting?
- What do the **lines** and **shapes** guide your eye toward?
- How do the **colors** support the story Copley is telling?
- What can we learn about Revere—not from history books, but from this single captured moment?

Copley invites you to look closely, think deeply, and use your eyes as an artist—not just a student of history.

OBSERVE THE ARTWORK

What is the **subject** (the main focus/story)?

A Single Person Group of people Landscape or Nature Still Life
 Scene: Scripture Scene: History Scene: Mythology/Legend Other:

What **message** or **purpose** does this artwork have?

Sacred / Religious Secular / Non-Religious Unknown / Unclear

How **realistic** is this artwork's style?

Very Realistic / Naturalistic Stylized but still recognizable Abstract / Non-Representational

TECHNIQUE & DESIGN

What is the **medium** used in this piece of artwork?

What do you observe about the **surface/technique**?

Smooth and Polished Detailed and Precise Textured or Layered
 Energetic or Expressive Repetitive or Patterned Other:

What do you observe about **texture**?

Smooth Surface Rough or Uneven Surface A Mix of Textures

What do you observe about **line**?

Strong Outlines Around Shapes Subtle/Blended Edges
 Lines Create Movement or Direction Lines Create Rhythm or Pattern

What do you observe about the **proportions**?

Natural / Realistic Idealized
(more perfect than real life) Exaggerated or Distorted

LIGHT & SPACE

Can you locate the **light source** in the artwork?

No Yes If yes, from where?

What do you observe about the **light**?

Natural Symbolic/Unrealistic Studio Light Direct Light/Harsh

Is there a sense of **movement**?

Everything appears still & stable A sense of motion (describe what suggests it):

Is there a sense of **depth**?

Illusion of distance flat/lacking depth

How did the artist suggest depth? (Overlap, scale, perspective, color, etc)

COLOR & SYMBOLISM

What **hues** do you see? (Check all that apply)

Red Red-Orange Orange Yellow-Orange Yellow Yellow-Green
 Green Blue-Green Blue Blue-Violet Violet Red-Violet

Where do these hues appear on the **color wheel**?

Complementary (opposite) Analogous (side-by-side) Warm Cool

What **saturation**s are used?

Bright/Intense Pale Darkened

Are there **symbolic uses** of color? Any meaning/purpose in the colors used? Explain.

INTERPRETATION & MEANING

What do you notice about the **gesture/positioning/gaze/placement** of the subject(s)?

What **story, idea** or **emotion** might the artist be communicating through this artwork?
What story are they trying to tell the observer?

How might someone in the original time and place have understood or appreciated this artwork differently than we do today? Would there be a different narrative around it?

Does this work **remind you of another** artwork, story, or cultural symbol? Does it look like anything else you have observed in your studies or the world around you?

COMPOSITION SKETCH

Draw (only) the **major shapes** and composition **in simplified shape form**.



* KEY FACTS FOR MEMORIZATION *

TITLE:

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ARTIST:

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YEAR:

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LOCATION:

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MEDIUM:

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STYLE:

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Sources consulted: Museum of Fine Arts Boston; Smarthistory; The Colonial Society of Massachusetts; The Met Museum Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History; Encyclopedia Britannica; John Singleton Copley, *Paul Revere* (c. 1768–70) scholarly articles.