John Singleton Copley *Unfinished Portrait of Nathaniel Hurd* (ca. 1765)

Marjorie B. Searl

Visitors standing in front of the Memorial Art Gallery's unfinished portrait of Boston silversmith Nathaniel Hurd ask important questions. Why didn't the artist complete the job? Does the painting have any value? Why did it survive? Why hang an unfinished painting in a museum?

The question of value is easily answered. Because MAG's portrait was painted by one of America's finest painters, John Singleton Copley, it is significant as part of the record of his distinguished career.[1] For scholars, its lack of finish yields new information about Copley's painting techniques and helps to better establish the date of this work and perhaps others. And because a finished portrait of Hurd, also by Copley, does exist, we might be able to learn why Copley didn't finish the job and why the unfinished painting survived.[2]

In the 1760s, Boston was a thriving city of around 16,000 people, one of the "big three" in the British colonies, along with New York and Philadelphia.[3] With a monied class that could afford to surround itself with luxuries—and indeed felt entitled to them—artists and artisans had patrons among the British and the colonists alike. One of the best known was the silversmith and engraver Nathaniel Hurd, son of the master silversmith Jacob Hurd. Hurd's upbringing was a traditional one for a mid-eighteenth-century boy—a few years of schooling at Boston Latin School, followed by apprenticeship, most likely to his father. He set up his own shop in the vicinity of the Old State House, easily accessible to many of the leading families of colonial Boston. Some of his most significant commissions were pieces for the distinguished Hancock, Mather, and Hutchinson families. While Hurd's name is not as well known as that of his fellow silversmith, Paul Revere (1734–1818), his engraving was sought after by Revere and other silversmiths, earning him the sobriquet "Hurd the engraver." Hurd had numerous engraving commissions; bookplates and currency bore his designs, which live on in the seals for Harvard College and Phillips Exeter Academy. We can assume his status as a respected citizen, since he held appointed positions such as fire ward, clerk of the market, and "scavenger." He served on the grand jury that was charged with investigating the death of Crispus Attucks, the first casualty of the Boston Massacre. Hurd never married, and died in middle age. His few possessions at the time of his death were distributed among friends and family members.

John Singleton Copley, 1738–1815
Unfinished Portrait of Nathaniel Hurd, ca. 1765
Oil on canvas, 29⅜ x 24⅝ in.
Marion Stratton Gould Fund, 44.2

In spite of his renown among his fellow Bostonians, Hurd was not as affluent nor as socially prominent as those successful colonial "aristocrats"—by birth or self-styling—who sat to have their portraits painted by John Singleton Copley. Copley, whose early years were spent on the Boston wharves where his mother ran a tobacco shop, had traveled far in station if not in geographical terms. His native skill at capturing likenesses propelled him into the premier place as portrait artist in Boston. His marriage to Susannah Clarke, whose father was a tea merchant, positioned him even higher in Boston society. By the 1760s, Copley was commissioned to paint Boston's finest, including Mrs. and Mrs. John Hancock and Mercy Otis Warren.[4]

While artists were paid well for their individual oil and pastel portraits, those works took up a fair amount of time and brought a one-time compensation. Always looking for additional markets, painters like Copley recognized that an engraved image of a particularly popular or important individual could be printed and sold many times over. Rev. Joseph Sewall (1688–1769), pastor of Boston's Old South Church, fit this bill. He presided over the church in the years preceding the American Revolution, and endeared himself to the Patriot community because he permitted the

John Singleton Copley, 1738–1815
Nathaniel Hurd, ca. 1765
Oil on canvas, 30⅜ x 25⅝ in.
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church to be used for anti-British political gatherings. Copley had already painted his portrait by 1764, but in a pre-photography era, an engraving was the only means by which the general public could remember him.

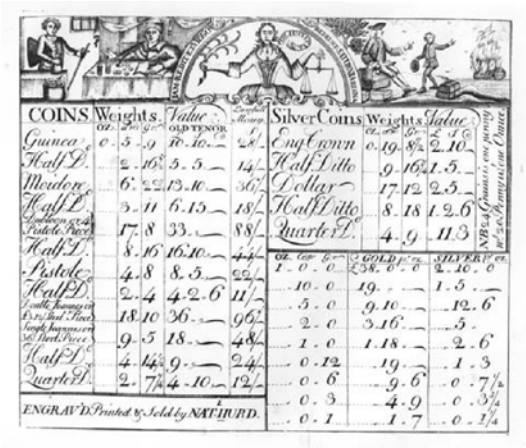
After first approaching British engravers with no success—colonial arts were considered inferior—Copley turned to fellow Bostonian Nathaniel Hurd for assistance with this project.[5] We can assume that the two prodigies were known to each other, as Boston was a relatively small community, and the two counted several of the same families as patrons. Family tradition suggests that Hurd's brother, Benjamin, studied painting with Copley, and there is speculation that Hurd may have learned engraving from Copley's stepfather, Peter Pelham.[6] But the definitive proof of a relationship is the existence of a miniature Copley portrait of a younger Nathaniel Hurd.[7]

Written documentation of their relationship is virtually nonexistent. Copley mentions in a 1764 letter that he has contacted Hurd to do the Sewall engraving, but there is no description of the terms. We may speculate that the two made a trade—Hurd's engraving for a Copley portrait. But there is a mystery. Aside from the miniature, two portraits of Hurd painted by Copley survive. One is the unfinished painting in the collection of the Memorial Art Gallery. The other is a finished portrait in the collection of the Cleveland Museum of Art. Here we come to more of our initial questions. Which portrait came first? Why was one left unfinished? What is the relationship between the two, and what is their significance in Copley's work?

Neither painting is dated by the artist.[8] Neither is documented by Copley or Hurd in any letters or ledgers. Again, we are in the realm of speculation. However, it would be logical to assume that the unfinished portrait was the earlier one, and that for some reason, either for the artist or the subject, it was unsatisfactory and therefore abandoned in favor of the one that was completed. So, the question is, what made the earlier version less acceptable, and to whom?

To judge from surviving paintings by Copley, his portrait of Hurd is his first attempt to paint an artisan in workclothes. He would go on a few years after finishing that portrait to paint one of his most brilliant works, the portrait of Paul Revere (ca. 1768, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston) dressed in work attire, holding a piece of silver. It may be that it was Hurd himself who was dissatisfied. If this was, in fact, his payment for preparing and printing an engraving for Copley, he probably wanted to be paid with a work in Copley's best style, rather than in an experimental version whose expanse of exposed flesh might be viewed as scandalous. Hence the finished portrait in the collection of the Cleveland Museum depicting Hurd dressed in a silk banyan and a turban, with a book of heraldry at his elbow. This was a portrait that would link Hurd, visually, with the merchants and scholars who were his patrons, elevating his status to that of a professional rather than a working-class artisan. Carrie Rebora Barratt links this portrait with fifteen others that depict men in fashionable *turquerie,* costumes that reflect the eighteenth-century craze for things Turkish and Oriental. She concludes that "Hurd's image, if we pursue this line of thinking, cleaves him from his artisanal colleagues and aligns him socially and economically with his elite clientele, such as Nicholas Boylston."[9] And, in reality, the role of the silversmith straddled class distinctions. Since patrons typically brought in their silver coins to be melted down and reused in the form of spoons, canns, and salvers, a silversmith like Hurd was charged with determining weights and values of coinage, putting him in a position not unlike a banker in terms of handling significant amounts of money and calling for a high degree of trustworthiness. Presumably, his portrait needed to reflect his professional success. Even his facial expression in the finished portrait has a more corpulent, well-fed appearance, in contrast to the wistful, introspective, and possibly anxious look of the unfinished portrait.

If the abandoned canvas was *not* perceived as the preferred pose or the artist's best effort, then what is its value within the context of Copley's oeuvre? First, as mentioned previously, it represents Copley's developing interest in the informal portrait of the working artisan, which was in itself a revolutionary, anti-aristocratic idea. But beyond the iconography, the painting is a visual demonstration of Copley's working method. The gray underpainting, normally covered, is left revealed. "Dead color" was used to prime the canvas in order to enhance the colors being used to paint the subject. Also, a very close look at the portrait in the area of Hurd's fingers reveals the underdrawing Copley used as he sketched his subject on top of the ground before applying layers of colors.[10]



Nathaniel Hurd
1730–1777
Exchange Table, undated
Engraving, 4 x 5⅜ in.
Courtesy of American Antiquarian Society

The lives of the two men, reaching their professional prime when this painting was done, would diverge significantly. Hurd remained in Boston, a town that was to suffer greatly during the American Revolution. As taxes and boycotts increased in number, Hurd's sources of income declined. The tax on paper reduced his engraving commissions, and when tea was boycotted, it effectively eliminated commissions for the silver tea accoutrements that were needed by his customers. Money was scarcer in general, and many wealthy families fled the region for safer ground. In addition, Hurd seems to have been unable to fulfill governmental commissions after a time; in November 1776, it was ordered that "the committee appointed to cut plates for a new emission of money, take from Mr. Hurd the plates he began to engrave, and deliver the same to Mr. Revere, to be completed."[11] His will indicates that he had a terminal illness for which he required the care of one Polly Sweetser, and he acknowledged her "Kindness and Tenderness to me in my Sickness."[12] He was buried in the Granary Burial Ground in Boston, not far from the monument to Paul Revere.

Copley, on the other hand, left for Europe to study paintings of the Old Masters. His wife and family stayed behind but as the political situation deteriorated, it soon became necessary to send for them. That move marked the end of Copley's relationship with Boston, the city that exalted him as an honored son. He remained in Europe for the rest of his life, died in 1815, and was buried at Highgate Cemetery in London, England, with other notables like authors Charles Dickens, George Eliot, and Karl Marx.

Nathaniel Hurd,
1730–1777
Spoon, ca. 1760
Silver, 8¾ x 1 11/16 in.
Maurice R. and Maxine B. Forman Fund, 2001.22.1

Both portraits remained in the Hurd family for many years. That the unfinished portrait came down through the Hurd/Furnass family may indicate its value to family members from the beginning, perhaps as the more realistic depiction of a revered ancestor. Its provenance began with Hurd's sister Ann. Might she have prevailed upon her brother to keep the portrait? She seems to have been, of the four sisters, the one closest to Nathaniel. She named one son after her brother, and her other son, John Mason Furnass, inherited from his uncle a printing press and some tools, "in consideration for the Love I bear to him & the Genius he discovers for the same Business which I have followed & to which I intended to have brought him up."[13]

As for the final unanswered question—why would a museum exhibit an unfinished portrait? In addition to the scholarly, historical, and anecdotal value of this painting, there is an additional and perhaps fundamental dimension: beauty. This may have been the quality most highly prized as the painting was handed down through the generations and as the original connection with the beloved brother and uncle became attenuated. After nearly two hundred and fifty years, the tender and shadowy contours of Hurd's face and the softness of his eyes and mouth have become parts of an aesthetic whole, perhaps all the more satisfying for the hint of mystery it imparts to its subject.

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