

John Singleton Copley



“The Monster was already too near him for the youth to be timely apprized of his danger; and the sailors had the afflicting sight of seeing him seized and precipitated down the flood with his voracious assailant, before they could put off to attempt his deliverance. They however hastened towards the place...” From the inscription on the painting’s original frame



John Singleton Copley, *Watson and the Shark*, 1778, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Ferdinand Lamot Belin Fund

This painting was a huge success and launched Copley's career in England. The artist painted a full-scale replica for himself. It is now in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

1 Danger!

Watson and the Shark depicts a real event that took place in the harbor at Havana, Cuba, in 1749. Brook Watson was a fourteen-year-old orphan who worked on a trading ship. One day he went swimming in the warm waters of the harbor and was attacked by a shark. As his shipmates rushed to his rescue, the shark circled around again, pulling Watson underwater and biting off his right foot.



John Singleton Copley, *The Copley Family*, 1776/1777, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Andrew W. Mellon Fund

2 Heroism!

Thanks to the sailors' quick actions, Watson lived to tell his story. It took him three months to recover. His leg was amputated below the knee, and he was fitted with a wooden leg that he wore for the rest of his long life. He later moved to England, where he became a successful politician and businessman. Almost thirty years after the attack, Watson hired artist John Singleton Copley (1738–1815) to record his amazing rescue story for history. Years later, he gave the painting to a boys' school, hoping his bravery might inspire others to overcome life's challenges. It also served as a lesson about the risks of foolish behavior.



3 Suspense!

One of the most talented artists in colonial America, Copley moved from Boston in 1775, on the eve of the American Revolution, and settled with his family in London, England. He had never been to Cuba. To create an accurate background view of the harbor's buildings and ships, he studied maps and prints of Havana. Copley had never seen a tiger shark either. Notice the shark's oddly shaped nostrils, strange lips, and ear. It might not be accurate, but it's still a scary-looking shark!

Copley focused on the moment right before Watson was rescued. The boy's fate is still uncertain. He struggles in the water as the terrifying shark comes back, opening its powerful jaws to attack once more. Watson's mouth and eyes are wide open in fear. The shark is just inches away. He reaches his hand up toward his rescuers. Will he make it?

Copley packed nine men into the small rescue boat. Four sailors pull their oars to maneuver closer to Watson. Two young seamen lean over the gunwale, straining to reach the frightened boy, while their bald-headed mate grabs onto a shirt. One standing sailor throws out a rope, and another thrusts his harpoon at the shark.

Look closely at the faces and gestures of the sailors

How do you think each one feels? The range of expressions heightens the tension and reality of the moment.



Claude-Joseph Vernet

Action-Adventure-Imagination

The painting *Watson and the Shark* recounts a real-life event, but French artist Claude-Joseph Vernet (1714–1789), like many artists, made up a dramatic scene. This vivid painting of a shipwreck is a lot like an action-adventure movie. It's an imaginary story, created to thrill, frighten, and delight viewers. Think about creating a sound track to go along with this picture. What sounds would enhance the horror of this tragic shipwreck?

shrieking people

booming thunder

breaking trees

raging waters

crying children

howling wind



Vernet specialized in painting stormy seascapes. What artistic choices add to the drama of the scene? Illuminated by a yellow zigzag of lightning, the dark sky is painted a menacing gray with touches of purples and blues. The foamy waves of the green sea crash against the rocky shore. The ship's flag whips in the howling wind, its sails torn to shreds, its mast tilting at a dangerous angle. A tree on the cliff has been splintered. Only the castle in the distance stands strong. Everyone works frantically to secure the ship, save its supplies, and rescue the survivors. Their poses express fear, exhaustion, and relief. Through this physical and emotional struggle, Vernet shows the overwhelming power of nature. What do you think will happen next? Will the ship in the distance avoid the storm, or will it suffer the same fate?

Some paintings are meant to make you feel happy or peaceful, while others are designed to worry or scare you. Vernet created paintings that did both. Although the shipwreck is imaginary, he described the horrible experience in a way that stirs emotions.

Suspenseful Stories

Create your own scary adventure inspired by the following prompts:

It was a dark and stormy night . . .

Suddenly the lights went out and . . .

It started out small but then . . .

The creaking door opened ever so slowly . . .

Or start your own!

Claude-Joseph Vernet, *The Shipwreck*, 1772, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Patrons' Permanent Fund and Chester Dale Fund

The most famous landscape and maritime painter in eighteenth-century France, Vernet was admired for his ability to combine the spectacular effects of weather with detailed, lively figures.

