

Mrs. Joseph Hooper, c. 1767
John Singleton Copley (American, 1738-1815)

This traditional 18th-century portrait “models” the face with light and shadow.



Oil on canvas; 50% x 40% inches. The Baltimore Museum of Art: Gift of Dr. Morton K. Blaustein, Barbara B. Hirschhorn, and Elizabeth B. Roswell, in Memory of Jacob and Hilda K. Blaustein, BMA 1981.74

John Singleton Copley was a highly acclaimed colonial American artist who painted the portraits of many prominent New England families during the years before the Revolutionary War. He had great skill in depicting his affluent sitters and their fine clothing accurately and convincingly. At the BMA, Copley’s portrait of Mary Harris Hooper (1746-1796) is joined by his portrait of her husband, Joseph Hooper, a merchant who specialized in ropes for the rigging of ships.

How much of Mrs. Hooper’s face shows?

- Mrs. Hooper turns her face slightly to the left for a three-quarter view. (We see two eyes, but only one ear.)

From what direction is the light coming?

- Light comes from the left, striking the right side of Mrs. Hooper’s face. (Cover the entire bright side of Mrs. Hooper’s face and note how the remaining dark side of her face merges with the black background.)

How does an artist make the nose project outward and the eyes sink in?

- Copley used light and shadow to suggest the ins and outs of Mrs. Hooper’s face just as a clay portrait is modeled by pushing some areas of the face in and pulling other parts out.
- The strongest light falls on the projecting parts of the face; shadows veil areas of the face that turn away from the light.

How did Copley create the illusion of real light and shadow on Mrs. Hooper’s face?

- Copley varied the flesh tones on Mrs. Hooper’s face with higher value tones suggesting light and lower value tones suggesting shadow.
- The transition from Mrs. Hooper’s highlighted cheek to her shaded chin occurs very gradually. However, at the ridge of her nose, light shifts abruptly into deep shadow.

How would you describe the brushwork on Mrs. Hooper’s face?

- The brushwork on Mrs. Hooper’s face is so smooth that it is impossible to see. The only obvious marks of the brush are those that depict loose strands of hair near her ear.
- In the 18th century, “invisible” brushwork was seen as the mark of a highly skilled artist.