



Bass Otis' *Interior of a Smithy*; c. 1815; Oil on canvas; 50½" x 80½"
Pennsylvania Academy of the Arts; Gift of the artist

Art in the New World: the Glorified Laborer

A painting of such content had never before been seen in either the Old or the New World. How was it possible for such a young artist to paint such an extraordinary subject? The answer to this question lies in the new nation's perception of itself and its newfound ideals. The young country had just fought a war both for equality, where laborers were considered equal to gentlemen, and in support of a fair government with an egalitarian judicial system. Lyon's story embodied both of these principles. Not only did he represent the "American" ideal of starting from nothing and making something of oneself, but he also vindicated the new American political system. Judge Yates, the judge assigned to Lyon's trial, stated in his last charge to the jury, "... the tradesman who depends upon his labor for his existence, is to be regarded as much as any other member of the community, Wealth and respectability of character should not weigh as a feather in the scale, when another man's rights are violated. It is unquestionably time, that in our country at least, we stand up on the rights of man, neither wealth nor office create an unequal standing, or give to any man a superiority over his fellow citizens."¹

This novel outlook on laborers was also in large part due to the machinations of Benjamin Franklin. He advertised for artisans to immigrate to America from Europe to "practice profitable mechanic Arts, without incurring Disgrace on that Account, but on the contrary, acquiring Respect by such Abilities."² Franklin supported the Protestant work ethic, whose reward for hard work was material gain. In his advertisements, he appealed to the struggling masses of overpopulated Europe:

¹ The Trial 176. Cited in Torchia 81.

² Craven, *Colonial American Portraiture*, 334-35.

... there is a continued Demand for more Artisans of all necessary and useful kinds Tolerably good Workmen in any of those mechanic Arts are sure to find Employ[ment], and to be well paid for their Work, there being no Restraints preventing Strangers from exercising any Art understand, nor any Permission necessary. If they are poor, they begin first as Servants or Journeymen; and if they are sober, industrious, and frugal, they soon become Masters, establish themselves in Business, marry, raise Families, and become respectable Citizens.³

This work ethic permeated American culture and eventually the art that depicted it. It was the combination of manual labor, and the ethics of morality, dignity and industry that would help create a truly American style of art.⁴

The same analysis of the social atmosphere surrounding and influencing the portrait of Pat Lyon can also be applied to John Singleton Copley's *Paul Revere*, painted between 1768-1770 and housed at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. Here, too, we see the smith (whitesmith, in Revere's case) depicted studying his work, without a gentleman's coat. Although not taken nearly to the extremity of Neagle's piece (Revere is not laboring in the least.), this painting, through its depiction of Revere without jacket and holding a piece of his own handiwork, also demonstrates the newfound ideals of the colonies, making it a perfect visual antecedent to *Pat Lyon at the Forge*.



John Singleton Copley's *Paul Revere*; 1768-1770; Oil on canvas; 28½" x 35"
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

3 Craven, *Colonial American Portraiture*, 334-35.

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The third reason behind this steadily increasing divergence from European art of the same period lies in the type of citizenry that comprised early American society. These were a practical, materialistic people, made up of merchants and farmers. The type of art being painted concurrently in Europe was becoming increasingly romanticized, reminiscent of the artists of Antiquity, the Renaissance and the Baroque (Titian, Correggio, Raphael) with scenes of nude classical goddesses and Biblical heroes. While some American artists attempted to institute the popularity of this style in America (namely John Trumbull, John Vanderlyn and Washington Allston), Americans preferred to give their support to artists who could paint scenes of the country and life with which they were familiar.⁵

The fact that the painting depicts a laborer at work was singular, remarkable and unprecedented. Even Pat Lyon recognized the change in society's perception of the laborer's status. When commissioning his portrait, he entreated Neagle:

I wish you, sir, to paint me at full length, the size of life, representing me at the smithery, with my bellows blower, hammers, and all the etceteras of the shop around me.... I wish you to understand clearly, Mr. Neagle, that I do not desire to be represented in the picture as a gentleman—to which character I have no pretension. I want you to paint me at work at my anvil, with my sleeves rolled up and a leather apron on.

Despite his own membership in the gentlemanly class, Lyon realized that the laborer had become both a token of moral uprightness and a symbol of the ideals of the new nation; his depiction in Neagle's painting as a blacksmith would forever immortalize him as the victim of an unjust persecution from those "gentlemen" with whom he so earnestly avoided association. The contemporary editor, Chandler, described the portrayal of Lyon as having "that peculiar right forward look of self complacency, that denotes all well within, and that generous glow of countenance that tells of self dependence, and consciousness of right."⁶ He was not the only one to note this facet of the painting; it was the quite obvious and deliberate intent of the artist and his subject.

American society's increasingly positive opinion of the laborer, the blacksmith in particular, was further evident in the numerous honors personally accorded to Lyon during and after his life. The simple fact that a mere blacksmith would be so highly esteemed was in itself an extraordinary circumstance that would later be accompanied by additional recognition. On March 7, 1832, a parade of black- and whitesmiths used the background of the portrait of Pat Lyon as the decoration on one of their banners. Emblazoned across the banner were also the words "The art of man is great indeed/But none the Blacksmith can exceed."⁷ A decade later, James Rees, a Philadelphia

5 Craven, Bass Otis: Painter, Portraitist and Engraver, 25-26

6 Saturday Evening Post, unidentified issue of June 1827 in Scrapbook I, HSP. Cited from Torchia 83.

7 Torchia 89

playwright, wrote a “domestic drama” about Lyon, entitled “Pat Lyon, the Locksmith of Philadelphia.” Performed on May 7, 1842 at the Arch Street Theatre in Philadelphia, the play was “accurately composed from published and verbal authority” with even the scenery meticulously replicated from Neagle’s painting by the set designer, John Wiser.⁸ After Lyon’s death, his biography was written in Henry Simpson’s *The Lives of Eminent Philadelphians*, published in 1849. Here Lyon’s story was printed alongside the biographies of the country’s most revered citizens, comprised primarily of scientists, doctors, merchants, lawyers and soldiers. Including Lyon among the ranks of such highly esteemed men can be attributed to the respect he had garnered through his trial and imprisonment and the characteristically American regard for all men, regardless of social standing. Simpson concluded the entry by explaining that Lyon was “respected for his honesty and fair-dealing, and a bright example to those whose bad luck may sometimes be in the ascendant; but who nevertheless, if they are honest, will be sure to conquer.”⁹

Conclusion

In 1798, after losing both his wife and his daughter to yellow fever, Lyon feared for his own death and wrote his last will and testament, with the following epitaph:

My sledge and hammer’s both declin’d,
My bellows too have lost their wind;
My fire’s extinct; my forge decay’d,
And in the dust my vice is laid;
My coal is spent, my iron’s gone,
My nails are drove, *my work is done.*¹⁰

On the contrary, Lyon lived another thirty years, passing away in 1829. His story lives on today, however, through the artistic genius of John Neagle. *Pat Lyon at the Forge* serves as a depiction of the origin of America and the people who comprised it. Though not formally trained, Neagle was one of a great community of truly American artists who, by painting their way through the trials of the nation’s early years, have handed down to us not only the stories of America’s ancestors, but an artistic style all their own.

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8 HSP Scrapbook II. Probably written by Neagle’s friend, Charles Durang as part of his Sunday Dispatch series on the history of the American stage. Cited from Torchia 89.

9 Henry Simpson, *The Lives of Eminent Philadelphians*. [Philadelphia, William Brotherhead, 1859], 678. Cited in Torchia 89.

10 Lyon 35. Cited in Torchia 89-90.

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