

By 1776 the fine art of painting as it had developed in western Europe up to this time had been introduced into the American colonies through books and prints, European visitors and immigrants, and traveling colonists who brought back copies (and a few original) of old master paintings and acquaintance with European art institutions.

By the outbreak of the Revolution against British rule in 1776, the status of the artists had already undergone change.

In the mid-eighteenth century, painters had been willing to assume such artisan-related tasks as varnishing, gilding teaching, keeping shops, and painting wheel carriages, houses, and signs.

The terminology by which artists were described at the time suggests their status: "limner" was usually applied to the anonymous portrait painter up to the 1760's: "painter" characterized anyone who could paint a flat surface.

By the second half of the century, colonial artists who were trained in England or educated in the classics rejected the status of laborer and thought of themselves as artists.

Some colonial urban portraitists, such as John Singleton Copley, Benjamin West, and Charles Wilson Peale, consorted with affluent patrons.

Although subject to fluctuations in their economic status, all three enjoyed sufficient patronage to allow them to maintain an image of themselves as professional artists, an image indicated by their custom of signing their paintings.

A few art collectors James Bowdoin III of Boston, William Byrd of Virginia, and the Aliens and Hamiltons of Philadelphia introduced European art traditions to those colonists privileged to visit their galleries, especially aspiring artists, and established in their respective communities the idea

of the value of art and the need for institutions devoted to its encouragement.

Although the colonists tended to favor portraits, they also accepted landscapes, historical works, and political engravings as appropriate artistic subjects.

With the coming of independence from the British Crown, a sufficient number of artists and their works were available to serve nationalistic purposes.

The achievements of the colonial artists, particularly those of Copley, West, and Peale, lent credence to the boast that the new nation was capable of encouraging genius and that political liberty was congenial to the development of taste—a necessary step before art could assume an important role in the new republic.