

Basic Detail Report



00036375

Title

A Youth Rescued From a Shark [After John Singleton Copley's painting 'Watson and the Shark']

Date

1779

Primary Maker

John Singleton Copley

Medium

Mezzotint print on paper

Dimensions

Overall: 380 x 438 mm, 20 g

Name

Print

History

The word 'shark' is analogous with 'attack' - as one of nature's oldest and most feared creatures, the shark has a long history of being portrayed as a ferocious man-eating monster. From 18th century images like this engraving, to the 1975 Steven Spielberg movie Jaws, the portrayal of sharks has raised people's fears of them to epidemic proportions around the world. This engraving depicts the real events of the shark attack and rescue of a young boy in Havana Harbour, Cuba. In 1749, 14 year old British born Brook Watson - who was serving as a crew member on an American merchant ship - was swimming alone in the harbour when he was attacked multiple times by a shark. A nearby boat came to Watson's aid and fought off the shark. Watson survived, but had his foot amputated below the knee. Despite the shark attack, Watson continued his mercantile career. He married in 1760, became Lord Mayor of London in 1796, and was made a Baron in 1803. However it was for his shark attack that he was best known. Watson even designed his coat of arms with reference to the attack: Neptune and a shield featuring Watson's severed leg, and the Latin motto Scuto Divino ('Under God's Protection'). It is believed that Watson commissioned John Singleton Copley, who he had previously befriended, to paint Watson and the Shark. Finished and exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1778, the painting caused a sensation. Upon Watson's death in 1807, the painting was bequeathed to Christ's Hospital - a school in Sussex - with the hope that it would be a useful lesson to the children. Copley went on to paint two other versions of the attack. The painting is both romantic and naïve - the gory leg is hidden beneath the water showing little blood, and the uncharacteristic (but none the less ferocious looking) shark is depicted with forward-facing eyes and lips, and unusually rounded pectoral fins. It is probable that Copley had never seen a real shark.