

# Basic Detail Report



**Title: New England Merchant**

Date: 1765

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Primary Maker: com.gallerysystems.emuseum.core.entities.RecordXPerson@28de0

Medium: Oil on canvas

Description: This portrait of a merchant was most likely executed during Peale's trip to New England in 1765, when he earned a meager income painting portraits and signs. On one occasion, finding himself out of money, "He thought of selling his watch, which he did to a Hatter for £5 taking a hat in part payment. Before this money was expended he got a small portrait to paint, for which he received 12 dollars and he now determined to leave Boston while he had the means." (1) "New England Merchant", one of Peale's earliest portraits, is thought to be that painting, (2) a conjecture supported by the picture's provenance, which traces the work to a Boston family. Peale's composition is a standard type: his merchant is depicted in a small room, leaning on a desk and holding a letter in his left hand. The quill, inkwell, and papers on the desk are references to the sitters' occupation. The small seascape visible through the open window is entirely appropriate for a Boston merchant, who would conduct much of his business through shipping. The letter is a commonly used device to record the identity of the sitter, whose name usually appears on the paper. The words on this letter are, unfortunately, illegible, and thus the man's identity remains unknown. Peale's early portraits, especially those painted during his trip to New England, are similar in size and composition and reveal his limited exposure to painting. While dark in color and somewhat crudely drawn, they clearly imitate the styles and poses of portraits by colonial painters John Wollaston, John Hesselius, and John Smibert and the British portraits they imitated. The pose of the New England merchant, for instance, is strikingly similar to that of William Johnston's "Charles Caldwell" (1763; NBMAA), a resemblance that is undoubtedly due to a shared print source. At this early stage, Peale's almost complete dependence upon established portrait styles is obvious, though not at all surprising, considering his training. Yet Peale's skills were already far superior to those of many of his contemporaries. "New England Merchant" includes some suggestion of depth and three-dimensionality and hints at an understanding of the description of shape, form, and modeling. The painting is very dark, making the objects in the background difficult to distinguish. The darkness is enlivened, however, by the orange and yellow of the sunset seascape seen through the window and by the green baize-covered table, the gold trim on the black curtain, and the bright red string tying the bundle of papers. MAS BIBLIOGRAPHY: James Thomas Flexner, "America's Old Masters: First Artists of the New World" (New York: Viking Press, 1939); Charles Coleman Sellers, "The Artist of the Revolution: The Early Life of Charles Willson Peale" (Hebron, Conn.: Feather and Good, 1939); Charles Coleman Sellers, "Charles Willson Peale, Later Life" (1790-1827), 2 vols. (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1947); Charles Coleman Sellers, "Portraits and Miniatures by Charles Willson Peale", part 1, "Transactions of the American Philosophical Society" n.s., 42 (1952); Edgar P. Richardson, Brooke Hindle, and Lillian B. Miller, "Charles Willson Peale and His World" (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1983); Charles Willson Peale,

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"The Selected Papers of Charles Willson Peale and His Family", ed. Lillian B. Miller, Sidney Hart, and David C. Ward, 4 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983-91). Notes: 1. Sellers, Artist of the Revolution, p. 64. 2. Charles Coleman Sellers to Robert C. Vose Jr., November 14, 1970, copy, NBMAA files.  
Dimensions: 18 x 15 in. (21 5/8 x 18 1/2 x 2 1/4 in.)