

# Death of Major Pierson Unknown (After Copley)

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**1870's**  
**Oil on Canvas**  
**129 x 89cm**

As you continue around the perimeter of the beautiful Assembly Rooms you will encounter Jersey's most famous image in the history of art. The Death of Major Pierson was painted in 1796 by the Canadian artist John Singleton Copley and depicts the Battle of Jersey which took place on the 6th January, 1781.

This military incursion led by Baron de Rullecourt was the last pitched battle fought on British soil and was the last attempt by France to invade the Island. The French almost succeeded when the Governor of Jersey surrendered the Island after the fall of its capital, St. Helier but a twentyfour-year-old garrison commander, Major Pierson, rejected the surrender and led a successful counter-attack. Pierson was in fact killed shortly before the battle but Copley shows him dying at the moment of British victory beneath the Union flag.

This is a copy of the original painting which now hangs in the Tate Gallery, London. There are many copies and prints of this painting around the Island as this image became a local symbol of pride and history.

The value of this copy of this painting was only realised during its restoration in 1995. The original work was commissioned by an Alderman of the City of London, John Boydell, who exhibited it in 1784. In 1796 a print appeared, engraved by James Heath, priced at 4 guineas.

The States of Jersey did not acquire their copy of the painting, which now hangs in the Royal Court, until 1864, after an unsuccessful bid to buy the original when Copley's son's estate was auctioned by Christie's. The full size copy by William Holyoake was so faithful to the original that it included the accumulation of surface dirt, resulting in a darker version than the original painting. During the restoration of the Town Hall's version of 'The Death of Major Pierson' it was discovered that the whole picture had at some time been entirely repainted, and what lay underneath was a very fine late 18th Century version of the original painting. When the backing was removed from the canvas the name of the original artist was revealed, together with its date – 1796. That was significant because almost certainly what the Parish of St Helier unknowingly had in its collection was the painting commissioned to enable Heath to do the engraving.