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# LIBERTY AND JUSTICE FOR ALL?: FEMALE PORTRAITURE IN THE AGE OF THE EARLY AMERICAN REPUBLIC

Although the Revolutionary War era and the following years were characterized by change and development based in the ideal of “liberty and justice for all,” the women of the new American Republic saw little improvement in their social status. Women were economically dependent on men, with their property and earnings belonging to their male counterparts, unless they were single and over eighteen or widowed.<sup>1</sup> Equal educational opportunities for women were rare. Schools specifically for women were created, but the scope of subjects covered were gendered in the extreme. Institutions of higher education were not open to women, thus those women who were privileged enough to pursue an intellectual life were constrained by the limits of patriarchal society. The role dictated by the gender dynamics of the age stipulated that the proper and primary place in society for women was in the home raising children, overseeing the household, and participating in gender appropriate activities, such as gardening. Despite this, the era was not without exceptional women who broke from these

gender norms to express talents and interests that may have been considered masculine.

Individual women voiced their dissatisfaction with the lack of equality both publicly through published literature and privately through letters. Abigail Adams is today one of the most well-known early American supporters of women’s rights. However, she did so only in her correspondence. American writer Judith Sargent Murray publicly wrote her thoughts on the subject, placing particular emphasis on the lack of equality in education. Internationally, Mary Wollstonecraft published a reasoned plea for equality in the context of the revolutionary movements throughout the West in the 18th century, initiating the modern feminist movement. Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication on the Rights of Women* quickly made its way to America and initiated a public discourse on the topic.

While these new Anglo-American concepts regarding the role of women in society were very much present on an international scale, is it evident in the portraiture of the age in

the most politically forward-thinking nation, America? An examination of several portraits by the two leading American portraitists of the period, John Singleton Copley and Gilbert Stuart, will demonstrate the status of women in the early Republic, or at least its representation. While these portraits represent the male conception of ideal womanhood during this era, they are nonetheless affected by the contemporaneous gender dynamics. Not incidentally, the portraits under discussion are of women with unique political consciousness. An inspection of these images against the backdrop of literature and discussion of the age regarding the role and status of women in society will show how male painter's representations of gender were out of sync with contemporary attitudes regarding women, particularly women's attitudes concerning themselves.

In the early eighteenth century, there was little large-scale public discussion of the concept of the rights of women. Judith Sargent Murray seems to have been the first American to write on this subject, publishing *On the Equality of the Sexes* in 1791. However, the first piece of literature that initiated an international public discussion of the rights of women was Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, published in 1792. First lady Abigail Adams in her letters to her husband, president John Adams, indicated that the subject permeated even private realms of life. Though there is no specific record indicating that Adams read Wollstonecraft's essay, given its prevalence in American magazines and its impact on the discourse surrounding women's rights, it is doubtful that she would have been unaware of the piece. Adams communicated many of the same ideas put forth by the author in her letters to John. Thus, Wollstonecraft's essay

played an important role in creating a dialogue on women's rights in America. A line from a poem from 1795 published both in New York and Philadelphia stated, "Let Woman have a share, / Nor yield to slavish fear. / Her equal rights declare."<sup>2</sup> In another poem, a female character stated, "We have rights, of which you know a draught . . . [were] sketch'd by one Miss Mary Wolstonecraft."<sup>3</sup>

Many scholars date the birth of early feminist consciousness to the writing of Wollstonecraft. Her 1792 essay was written in response to the events of the French Revolution and as a counter reaction to the philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau's ideas regarding natural virtues and gender complementarity, which permeated much of British society at the time.<sup>4</sup> In this work, Wollstonecraft addressed the existence of universal human rights and confronted the exclusion of women from these rights on the basis of sex alone. She wrote that "The rights of humanity have been . . . confined to the male line from Adam downwards..."<sup>5</sup> She argued that both men and women possess the ability to reason and thus women should have access to the same level of education and socio-economic influence. She stated that women should be offered the same access to classical education not only because they had an equal ability to reason, but also because women held an inherently important role in the social fabric of the nation: providing education to children. Wollstonecraft also stated that women should function as partners to their husbands, rather than being simply relegated to the domestic sphere of life as a wife.<sup>4</sup> Her discussion of the rights of women made no explicit demands of specific rights for women, nor did she address the political rights of women. Rather, Wollstonecraft

crafted an image of woman as an entity that, independent of man, is entitled to universal human rights.<sup>6</sup>

Excerpts of the essay reached magazines in Philadelphia and Boston as early as 1792, with three American editions of the work being published in 1795. The work was initially met with praise from critics. However, this was swiftly followed by a range of reactions, some of which were outright hostile. The rising popularity of the literary periodical in Post-Revolutionary America and the fact that many of these magazines marketed themselves to a female audience easily facilitated this debate. Countless pieces published in American women's magazines such as, *The Lady's Magazine*, *The Gentleman and Lady's Town and Country Magazine*, and the *Massachusetts Magazine*, referenced *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*.<sup>7</sup> While there was little concrete change in the status of women as a result of this piece of literature, it aided in shifting the dialogue from a micro to a macro scale. Wollstonecraft introduced the terminology and language to discuss the rights of women in a way accessible to the American public.

While Wollstonecraft's essay ignited public debate, the discussion of women's rights in Post-Revolutionary America was characterized by individual voices rather than any one cohesive movement. Two of the most significant and outspoken supporters of women's rights were Abigail Adams and Judith Sargent Murray.

Abigail Adams was the daughter of a wealthy parson and as a member of the well-established and politically connected Quincy family, Abigail knew well the inequality women faced when it came to education

even among the upper classes. In one of her letters from 1778 she wrote, "Every assistance and advantage which can be procured is afforded to the Sons, Whilst the daughters are wholly neglected in point of Literature."<sup>8</sup> While Abigail had no qualms about privately attempting to use any influence she had over her husband to advance the status of women, she did not publicly protest many of the conventions women were held to at the time.<sup>9</sup> Her letters to John, however, show that she was not unconcerned with the status of women's rights in the new nation and made attempts to convince her husband of the importance of including women in the adage "liberty and justice for all." This is particularly evident in her letter from March of 1776, in which she urges John to "Remember the ladies" while aiding in the construction of the new government. In the same letter, she continued, writing, "be more generous and favourable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power in the hands of the Husbands. ... If perticular care and attention is not paid to the Laidies we are determined to foment a Rebellion and will not hold ourselves bounds by any Laws in which we have no voice, or Representation."<sup>10</sup> John's responses to such letters seem to deflect her suggestions with humor, though with an underlying sense of discomfort. He wrote in reply, "As to your extraordinary Code of Laws, I cannot but laugh. ... Depend upon it, We know better than to repeal our Masculine systems. Altho they are in full Force, you know they are little more than Theory. We dare not exert our Power in its full Latitude."<sup>11</sup> Despite this, little tension in their relationship occurred as a result of Abigail's pleas. Nonetheless, John was well aware of Abigail's beliefs to the extent that in one letter, he refers to her as a "Disciple of Woolstoncroft."<sup>12</sup>

In August of 1776 Abigail raised the issue of the lack of education for women, writing to John, "If you complain of neglect of Education in sons, What shall I say with regard to daughters, who every day experience the want of it. With regard to Education of my own children, I find myself soon out of my depth, and destitute and deficient in every part of Education."<sup>13</sup> She goes on to state that, "If we mean to have Heros, Statesmen and Philosophers, we should have learned women. ... If much depends as is allowed upon the early Education of youth and the first principles which are instilled take the deepest root, great benefit must arise from literary accomplishments in women."<sup>14</sup>

This concern brought on by the lack of access to education was echoed by Judith Sargent Murray. Like Adams, Murray enjoyed the advantages of life as a member of a wealthy merchant class family. While the social status of her family provided many comforts and opportunities to become proficient in those activities then considered appropriate for a woman, Murray was not satisfied with the limitations placed on her. Though she asserted that men and women were intellectually equal, Murray was less generous on the subject of class and was exceptionally proud of her family's elite status. (She, herself, made two marriages that were both socially and financially disadvantageous.) Her belief in the validity of a hierarchical class-based system would have theoretically excluded women of a lower social class from enjoying the benefits of a society that held women as intellectually equal to men. Nonetheless, she expressed her frustration regarding gender limitations in her essay, *On the Equality of the Sexes*, published in 1791, a year before Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Women*.<sup>15</sup>

Published in two separate issues of *Massachusetts Magazine*, *On the Equality of the Sexes* did not spark debate as Wollstonecraft's piece did. Examining this issue through four different areas of intellect -- imagination, reason, memory, and judgement -- Murray provides arguments for why women are equal, if not superior, to men. For example, she flipped the typically negative perception of women's strong proclivity for imagination and curiosity on its head by arguing that these perceived weaknesses were a product of inferior education; with proper training, these traits in women would rival those of men. Murray also initially concedes that men are superior to women in reason and judgement. However, she states that this is due to the fact that women can only reason and judge from what they know, and thus the lack of access to an equivalent education hinders in these faculties. While Murray's evaluation of the current state of women's rights, particularly women's lack of equal access to education, was bleak, she held out hope for a future in America when women would have the same academic opportunities as men.<sup>16</sup>

Despite the discussion sparked by Wollstonecraft's essay and the contributions of women such as Abigail Adams and Judith Sargent Murray, little if any concrete change regarding the state of women's rights occurred during this era. Women could only attend schools specifically designed for their sex, and these schools offered basic academic education in arithmetic, reading and writing. Education in areas such as music, dancing, drawing, and social skills, were considered more appropriate for women and dominated the curricula. Thus "educated" women were confined to roles that served the patriarchy, through reinforcing predetermined roles in

social and domestic spheres.<sup>17</sup>

While the discussion regarding equality for women in the new nation was quite prevalent, this does not seem to be evidenced in the portraiture of the age. Artists typically tended to follow convention, adhering to the same iconographic language used in Britain. Men and women were portrayed differently, following this prescribed language, with subtle and not so subtle distinctions between them. For example, it is rare to see a woman holding a book or ink pen, while images of men are littered with such objects, affirming their high level of education. For women, fruit was symbolic in a fashion similar to that of flowers, meant to be perceived as an example of the female subject's discipline and skilled handiwork.<sup>18</sup> The additional symbolism of fruit as objects pertaining to fecundity reinforces the importance placed on reproduction at this time. Men were shown with objects associated with business, politics, and trade, such as ledgers, documents, and transatlantic ships.<sup>19</sup>

The leading artist of the period was John Singleton Copley, born in 1738 into a family of Irish immigrants living in Boston. A self-taught artist, Copley's only exposure to art while growing up was in his stepfather's engraving business. Despite his lack of training, Copley's skill when it came to rendering images of individuals and objects from life, coupled with the lack of competition, aided him in quickly becoming quite successful. His marriage to Susannah Clarke, the daughter of a wealthy Tory merchant, raised his social status and he was inundated with commissions from this same class.<sup>20</sup> Copley's style is characterized by its extraordinary realism and tactility. His penchant for depicting his sitters with an almost unforgiving

accuracy, never editing out warts or imperfections, contributed to their richness and humanity.<sup>21</sup>

Copley's talent for capturing the likeness of an individual while simultaneously projecting a sense of the sitter's personality and individuality holds true for his images of women and men. However, Copley did not completely stray from the tropes historically favored in depictions of women. His portraits often contain iconographical objects that inscribe a wealth of "feminized" meaning onto the sitter, especially pertaining to moral or virtuous qualities. As a result, he frequently captured the tenacity of some of the early champions of women's rights while still portraying them in the context of traditional roles of femininity. This dichotomy can be seen in his depiction of Mercy Otis [fig.1].

Mercy Otis was a dedicated supporter of the Patriot cause and one of the first to document the period. She published numerous satirical pieces lambasting the Loyalist cause, initially under a pseudonym, and also kept regular correspondence with key political players in the Revolutionary War, such as John Hancock, John Adams, and George Washington.<sup>22</sup> She used her writing as a vehicle for the colonies' complaints regarding British rule. This is clear in a poem titled *A Political Reverie*, which was published in the *Boston Gazette* in 1775. In this piece, Otis pits the misconduct of British rule, which she refers to as "Virtue turn'd pale, and freedom left the isle," against the enterprise and integrity of the colonies, writing, "They quitted plenty, luxury, and ease,/ Tempted the dangers of the frozen seas."<sup>23</sup>

Otis was born into a family of avid

supporters of the Patriot cause. Her portrait by Copley was painted in 1763 when she was either thirty-six or thirty-seven and already the mother of three children. Otis was an unusual woman for the age: having been allowed to attend her brother's tutoring sessions, she experienced an atypical level of education. Her marriage to James Warren, also a passionate advocate for the Patriot cause, supported her pursuit of knowledge. Otis became a prolific writer of poetry, parodies, and plays as well as historical tomes. However, this uncommon lifestyle caused much personal conflict for Otis. She wrote to John Adams that she was concerned her active life as an intellectual made her "deficient" when it came to her femininity. Her husband wrote that though she possessed a "Masculine genius" she still had the "Weakness which is the Consequence of the Exquisite delicacy and softness of her Sex."<sup>24</sup> Copley's depiction of her initially reveals none of these misgivings, following the familiar iconographical language that easily dictated feminine roles.

Otis stands with her body in profile, her head turning to face the viewer. She wears a blue satin dress with ruched sleeves and decorated with silver braids. She is also draped in a lace stole in addition to the lace detailing on the sleeves of her dress.<sup>25</sup> This same dress is used in two other paintings by Copley, a portrait of Mrs. Daniel Sargent and a portrait of Mrs. Benjamin Pickman [fig.2]. It is likely that the dress belonged to Otis and that she lent it these two women, who were close friends, as Otis had connections to the Pickman family through her male relatives.<sup>26</sup> These two paintings are wedding portraits and thus the subjects depicted are rather young, both around twenty years old.<sup>27</sup> Notably absent from these images is Otis' shawl,

or any similar type of coverup for that matter. The neckline in the wedding portraits are rather low cut, leaving much of the brides' chests exposed. This places emphasis on their sensuality. As a result of her status as a matron, Otis covers the low neckline by wearing the lace stole.

Otis stands on a hill, as the landscape behind her falls away. Her hand reaches out towards nasturtium vines, drawing attention to the plant. X-rays of this image have revealed that originally comma Copley had painted roses.<sup>28</sup> However, nasturtiums were considered to be a symbol of patriotism, and thus may have been seen as more appropriate for Otis. The depiction of Otis juxtaposed with the natural world speaks to her role as a nurturer. Flowers are also traditionally symbolic of fertility, incidentally relevant here as Otis would give birth to another child only a year after Copley painted this piece.<sup>29</sup>

Otis looks out at the viewer with a set mouth and determined gaze. This type of unwavering gaze is perhaps the strongest element in the painting that attests to her atypical lifestyle. Furthermore, despite a slight smile that plays about her lips, her visage is distinctly defeminized. Nonetheless, there is nothing more to indicate her unusually high level of education or her superior intellect. She is not shown with an ink pen or a book. While Otis's writings were yet to come, Copley does not betray an awareness of this potential, as the typical iconographic objects that would do so were strongly masculine gender markers.

The portrait of Mercy Otis Warren was accompanied by a portrait of her husband, James Warren [fig. 3]. These two images complement each other and play on parallel

imagery through their respective settings.

The couple's postures are oriented towards each other. However, while Mercy's body is in profile, James body is wholly frontal. Behind Warren, a large red curtain dominates the upper left-hand portion of the portrait, while to the right of the figure, the sky and trees are visible. This assists in unifying the two images, as a similar arrangement has been placed behind Mercy. Warren's ruddy complexion and his walking stick indicate his role during this period of his life, running his farm, before becoming actively involved in the political sphere.<sup>30</sup> The architectural and landscape elements seen in the background affirm the wealth and status of Warren, while also recalling his connection to the land and hardworking nature. No similarly specific or individuated iconography can be isolated for Mercy, with the exception of her greater bodily orientation toward her husband.

Copley was also commissioned to paint a portrait of Judith Sargent Murray when she was about twenty and newly married to her first husband, John Stevens [fig. 4].<sup>31</sup> Because a financially and socially advantageous marriage was considered to be the culmination of a women's ambitions, portraits were often commissioned to commemorate the event.<sup>32</sup> Copley's portrait of Murray communicates many of the couple's hopes for their union.

A lavender turban decorated with strings of pearls sits atop Murray's head. Under her dark blue over gown, she is uncorseted and her dress falls into folds that highlight the contours of her body. This type of dress is often employed in such portraits depicting women as they garden, and Murray is portrayed in the role of mock gardener, a scene

often employed by Copley. Her basket, which she gracefully rests on her hip, contains freshly picked roses, alluding to hope for a fruitful and loving marriage. In the eighteenth-century, gardening was considered an activity suitable for a refined gentlewoman.<sup>33</sup> Here, Copley uses the imagery of the garden once again to imply the importance of Murray's role as a nurturer, the flowers to symbolize the wish for a fruitful and fertile marriage, and the loose gown to draw attention to her youthful sexuality. The drapery of the fabric of her gown accentuates the curves of her body, and in concert with the lower neckline and the lack of a corset, adds an element of sensuality to the new bride.

While the majority of the portrait does not differ from the numerous gardening images painted by Copley, Murray's style of dress stands out in this particular genre. Her dress in this portrait closely reflects the *turquerie* style that was popular in the first three quarters of the eighteenth century. This style was originally conceived in Britain as a type of costume based on contemporary conceptions of classical garb from the Ottoman empire. Copley emulated this trope, which had been thoroughly westernized in Britain and still more distilled by its journey across the Atlantic to America. Murray's uncorseted dress, turban, pearls intertwined in her hair, and the low neckline of her dress are all characteristics of this style.<sup>34</sup> This style of dress, which was often coupled with a coy, averted gaze, an element absent from the portrait of Murray, contributed to its distinct sensuality. Outside of this, the image makes no potential references to her non-gendered identity, for example, as an intellectual or future advocate for women's rights.

However, Copley was able to convey the

pensive and serious nature of Murray through her gaze. While Copley's depiction of women did not entirely break from convention, as many of his portrayals of women heavily referenced iconographic tropes to reinforce gender roles, these portraits are not without innovation. In both of the examples under analysis here, he is able to communicate a sense of these women's intelligent alertness and resolute attitudes. Later works by Copley demonstrate the evolution of his portrayal of women, particularly in his portraits of couples. While he had initially followed the European tradition of depicting wives in a manner that indicates that they are submissive to their husbands, he later evolves to portray women as entities independent of their husbands. His portrayals of women began to break with convention, as he reacted with sympathy to the rather prevalent discussion of the rights of women in the new nation.<sup>35</sup>

The previous two images by Copley have placed emphasis on the concept of women as nurturers, referencing their role as the caretakers within the family unit and as progenitors of future generations; they largely ignore individual achievements otherwise considered too masculine. Copley also depicted each sitter with an intense realism, but with a sense of detachment and dignity that also reaffirmed their elite roles within society. The paintings of the other leading portraitist of the day, Gilbert Stuart, is a match for Copley's in realism, while appearing more engaged and individualized.

Born in Rhode Island in 1755, Gilbert Stuart, unlike Copley, went to Europe for his training (1775 - 1793). Though he was successful during his tenure in both London and Dublin, Stuart's penchant for extravagance led

him to flee his debts abroad and once again settle in America, this time in New York.<sup>36</sup> His style is strongly influenced by the British artists, Thomas Gainsborough and Joshua Reynolds. Preferring to work quickly, Stuart would regularly forego preliminary sketches, painting directly onto the canvas, often with quick short brush strokes.<sup>37</sup> Gilbert moved from New York to Philadelphia in 1794 to be closer to the new government in hopes of acquiring the opportunity to paint some of the most important politicians of the time. He followed the federal government's move to Washington D.C. in 1800 and achieved his goal, receiving commissions from many of the most highly regarded individuals on the political and social scene.<sup>38</sup> One of these commissions came from John and Abigail Adams in 1800.

Abigail sits in a three-quarters position, like Copley's figures, gazing directly out at the viewer [fig. 5]. Her mauve silk dress, which features a high collar, is draped with a shawl decorated in lace patterns. On her head she wears a bonnet, also decorated with lace details, and secured with a bow. The abundance of frilly lace decoration was considered appropriate stylistically for a matron. Her dress dates from 1800 and her cap and lace shawl date from about 1815.<sup>39</sup> Stuart used fluid strokes that have a sketchy effect, building up the forms using transparent planes of color and adding strokes over them to delineate highlights and shadows. A thicker application of paint designates Adams' shawl in addition to the highlights on the chair and the bonnet.

In this portrait, there is little iconographic symbolism to draw on, other than the particularly feminizing style of her clothing, whose delicacy contrasts with Adams' mature face

and hands. The background is simple and devoid of decoration that would create an identifiable location. This is typical of Stuart, who preferred to focus on the individual in order to produce a precise portrayal of the sitter.<sup>40</sup> Adams is seated with a poise befitting her role as First Lady, as she sits upright, though without conveying a sense of rigidity. Stuart accurately conveys her strength and personality through her penetrating gaze and pinched mouth. He makes no attempts to idealize her face or figure, as her age is apparent since Stuart does not shy away from depicting the loosening of the skin around her neck.

The companion portrait of John Adams was also started in 1800, but completed in 1815, after a multiplicity of letters urging Stuart to complete the two images [fig. 6]. This later finish date is evidenced by the style Stuart used in this piece, as he painted with a looser technique, particularly evident in Adams' shirt, coat, and cravat, typical of his later years. Heavy impasto strokes along the forehead also help to characterize this piece as a work of Stuart's from 1815.<sup>41</sup>

John Adams, like Abigail Adams, is portrayed in a three-quarters position and gazes directly out at the viewer. Again, Stuart makes no attempts to idealize the physical appearance of Adams, leaving his hair somewhat unruly and not editing out the obvious signs of aging in the eighty-year-old sitter. In Stuart's portrayal of John, the light falls onto his head and face, highlighting his expression and perhaps referencing Adams as the great political thinker of the age. His mouth is set in a firm line and his expression is somewhat stern. This element communicates the appropriate amount of *gravitas* for an acting President. Less attention is given to

John's garb when compared to the decorative lace that covers Abigail, a particularly feminizing touch, and the play of light across her dress. Both the attention to detail in the clothing and the highlighted sections of the painting communicate subtle, yet distinctly present gender divisions that seem to be so embedded in the *zeitgeist* of the time that they could not be forgotten, even in depictions of key political figures. While Stuart handles the issue of gender dynamics in an understated manner in these two pieces, he presents a more obvious portrayal of the gender dynamics in his portrait of Catherine Brass Yates [fig. 7].

A native of New York, Catherine Brass Yates, the daughter of a shoemaker, married wealthy merchant Richard Yates in 1747.<sup>42</sup> While it appears that Yates experienced a fairly typical life in regard to the gender roles at the time, her portrait is one of the finest examples in American art. The National Gallery of Art states the painting's significance: "... Stuart's brilliant paint manipulation generates a verve few other artists on either side of the Atlantic could have matched. Every passage contains some technical tour de force... It is little wonder that *Mrs. Richard Yates* has become one of America's most famous paintings, both as an artistic masterpiece and as a visual symbol of the early republic's rectitude."<sup>43</sup> Critic Royal Cortissoz wrote that, "It combines a... firm and weighty statement of fact with a touch equally sure but so light and flowing that the artist seems to be in absolutely effortless command of his instruments."<sup>44</sup> While these observations on style and content are true, it is also a highly gendered image.

Stuart paints Yates in a manner appropriate to her status as a matron in her mid-fifties.

She wears a white silk dress with a scarf around the bodice. Her only jewelry is a gold wedding band. Mrs. Yates sits with her torso sideways and her head turned towards the viewer, as she glances at the viewer. However, this does not divert her from her task, as she continues to sew, pulling the needle and thread taught. Her posture echoes the rigidity of the thread as she sits up straight and alert. Her uplifted hand and elbow form an inverted triangle, creating a balance with her rigid posture. Her tall bonnet emphasizes her features, such as her raised eyebrows and large eyes, pointed chin and nose. The sharpness of her features is left unidealized by Stuart, while he simultaneously imbues the likeness with a sense of individuality through her posture and gaze.<sup>45</sup>

The portrayal of an older woman sewing had many precedents in European and American art.<sup>46</sup> The activity of sewing is an example of domestic work and typically considered a gendered activity. Women were often taught to sew when they were sent to women's schools or were taught by a matriarchal figure. It was also an activity especially focused on by unmarried women, widows, and matrons. Only the elite could afford to hire servants to assist in tasks such as this, and in other cases, women were left to complete the work themselves.<sup>47</sup> While sewing was a gendered activity, it also served numerous vital purposes. Every fabric item, from clothing to bedsheets, required tedious hand sewing. Yates status as the wife of a wealthy merchant would presumably dismiss her from this activity. Therefore, the inclusion of this detail speaks more to its role as an activity considered appropriate for a gentlewoman. It also creates a dynamic relationship between this piece and the accompanying portrait of her husband [fig. 8]. Though his hand rests

on a stack of loose papers, implying that he is a man of worldly affairs and that he intends to move once the viewer has walked away, he is distinctly in a state of rest. Catherine, though she has stopped for a moment, seems ready to continue with the task at hand at any moment. Both paintings establish their identity as wholly gendered works: one is domestic, one is worldly; one's work can be put aside, one's work cannot, and so on. They are operating completely within the gender norms and expectations of their day.

Notably absent from the depictions of Catherine Brass Yates and Abigail Adams is the sensual qualities found in the image of Murray and the references pertaining to fertility. The lack of overt iconography is both a function of the stylistic preference of Stuart and, perhaps, related to their more advanced age. Naturally comma references to sexuality and fertility would have been perceived during this time as more appropriate for younger women. Younger women seeking a marriage would want to communicate their desirability, both through advertisement of their sexuality, fertility, discipline, and handiwork through iconographic symbols such as fruit, flowers, specific animals, and certain activities, such as gardening. Women who were already married, yet still of child-bearing age wish to proclaim possession of the qualities so highly valued by the patriarchal society. Yet while fertility would naturally still be a feature emphasized, the sensuality seen in wedding portraits would be less prevalent. Characteristics that were necessary to raise children and run a household successfully become even more valued at this stage of a women's age. Thus, these aspects are more prominently indicated in the iconography of women who are middle aged. In images of older women, reference to sexuality and

fertility are generally foregone. Rather, importance is placed more on productive and industrious activities that benefited the household, such as sewing. In the two images above that depict older women, there is an undeniable air of dignified authority that emanates from each figure. Youthful sexuality is deftly traded for respect garnered through years of catering to the needs of a household, children, husband, and the various social pressures of the day. While lack of agency would remain an issue, age incontrovertibly accrued some modicum of respect, despite the patriarchal societies perceived insufficiencies of the female sex.

During the period of the early American Republic there were both private discussions of women's rights and international public discourse on the subject. Nonetheless, no cohesive movement devoted to women's equality emerged in the eighteenth century. This lack of concrete development is reflected in female portraiture from the age, even of women of noted political consciousness. These portraits tended to construct images of an ideal woman, not so much through idealization of physical features, but through the use of iconographic language. Symbols that reinforce qualities men valued in women such as flowers, which reflected fertility and the discipline required for regimented care and cultivation, were ubiquitous. Portraits of women with high levels of education and literary accomplishments were depicted according to the prescribed language and with the appropriate gender markers, even as an unusual alertness and intelligence might be conveyed. While John Singleton Copley and Gilbert Stuart demonstrate great skill in depicting both accurate likenesses and what can only be described as a sense of individual personality, they cannot escape the

pervasive nature of gender conventions.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup>Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood : Woman's Sphere in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997).
- <sup>2</sup>Rosemarie Zagari, "The Rights of Man and Woman in Post-Revolutionary America." *The William and Mary Quarterly* 55, no. 2 (1998) 203-30.
- <sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 210.
- <sup>4</sup>Lisa Dicaprio and Merry E. Wiesner, *Lives and Voices: Sources in European Women's History* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 2001).
- <sup>5</sup>Mary Wollstonecraft, *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (South Bend: Infomotions, 2000).
- <sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 188.
- <sup>7</sup>Rosemarie Zagari, "The Rights of Man and Woman in Post-Revolutionary America." *The William and Mary Quarterly* 55, no. 2 (1998): 203-30.
- <sup>8</sup>"Abigail Adams to John Thaxter, 15 February 1778," *Founders Online*, National Archives, last modified June 13, 2018.
- <sup>9</sup>Abigail Adams, John Adams, L. H Butterfield, Marc Friedlaender, and Mary-Jo Kline, *The Book of Abigail and John : Selected Letters of the Adams Family, 1762-1784* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975), 5.
- <sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 121.
- <sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, 122.
- <sup>12</sup>Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams, January 22, 1794 [electronic edition], *Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive*, Massachusetts Historical Society.
- <sup>13</sup>Abigail Adams, John Adams, L. H Butterfield, Marc Friedlaender, and Mary-Jo Kline, *The Book of Abigail and John : Selected Letters of the Adams Family*, 153.
- <sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, 153.
- <sup>15</sup>Sheila L. Skemp, *First Lady of Letters : Judith Sargent Murray and the Struggle for Female Independence* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), xii - xiv.
- <sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, 4-7.
- <sup>17</sup>Lucia McMahon, *Mere Equals : The Paradox of Educated Women in the Early American Republic* (Cornell University Press, 2012).
- <sup>18</sup>Carrie Reborra Barratt, and Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York, N.Y.), *John Singleton Copley in America*, (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1995), 61.
- <sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, 62.
- <sup>20</sup>Louise Burroughs, "John Singleton Copley," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 31, no. 12 (1936): 252-58.
- <sup>21</sup>Robert Hughes, *American Visions : The Epic History of Art in America*. 1st ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), 84.
- <sup>22</sup>Rosemarie Zagari, *A Woman's Dilemma: Mercy Otis Warren and the American Revolution* (Somerset: John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated, 2014), accessed October 29, 2018, ProQuest Ebook Central, xiv.
- <sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, 68.
- <sup>24</sup>Barratt and Metropolitan Museum of Art, *John Singleton Copley in America*, 193.
- <sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*
- <sup>26</sup>Betty-Bright P. Low, Josephine Du Pont, and Margaret Manigault, "Of Muslins and Merveilleuses: Excerpts from the Letters of Josephine Du Pont and Margaret Manigault" (*Winterthur Portfolio*, 1974), 29-75, 33-34.
- <sup>27</sup>Barratt and Metropolitan Museum of Art, *John Singleton Copley in America*, 194.
- <sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, 193.
- <sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, 194.
- <sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, 193.
- <sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, 229.
- <sup>32</sup>Jennifer Van Horn and Omohundro Institute of Early American History & Culture, *The Power of Objects in Eighteenth-Century British America. Book Collections on Project Muse. Chapel Hill: Published for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture* (Williamsburg, Virginia: University of North Carolina Press, 2017).
- <sup>33</sup>Barratt and Metropolitan Museum of Art, *John Singleton Copley in America*, 232.
- <sup>34</sup>Isabel Breskin, "'On the Periphery of a Greater World': John Singleton Copley's 'Turquerie' Portraits,'" *Winterthur Portfolio* 36, no. 2/3 (2001): 99.
- <sup>35</sup>Barratt and Metropolitan Museum of Art, *John Singleton Copley in America*, 87-89.
- <sup>36</sup>Wayne Craven, *American Art : History and Culture* (New York: H.N. Abrams, 1994).
- <sup>37</sup>Eleanor Pearson DeLorme, "Gilbert Stuart: Portrait of an Artist," *Winterthur Portfolio* 14, no. 4 (1979), 339-60.
- <sup>38</sup>Wayne Craven, *American Art : History and Culture* (New York: H.N. Abrams, 1994), 143.
- <sup>39</sup>Ellen G. Miles, *American Paintings of the Eighteenth Century* (Washington, D.C.: The Collections of the National Gallery of Art Systematic Catalogue, 1995), 214-216, color repro, 215.
- <sup>40</sup>DeLorme, "Gilbert Stuart: Portrait of an Artist," 339-60.
- <sup>41</sup>Miles, *American Paintings of the Eighteenth Century*, 212.
- <sup>42</sup>*Ibid.*, 215.
- <sup>43</sup>Catherine Brass Yates (Mrs. Richard Yates)," *National Gallery of Art*.
- <sup>44</sup>Carrie Reborra Barratt, Gilbert Stuart, Ellen Gross Miles, Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York, N.Y.), and National Gallery of Art (U.S.), *Gilbert Stuart* (New York, N.Y.: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2004).
- <sup>45</sup>Miles, *American Paintings of the Eighteenth Century*, 215.
- <sup>46</sup>Barratt, *Gilbert Stuart*.
- <sup>47</sup>Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood : Woman's Sphere in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997).

## Images



Figure 1: Mrs. James Warren (Mercy Otis), John Singleton Copley, about 1763, Oil on canvas, Museum of Fine Arts Boston



Figure 2: Mrs. Benjamin Pickman (Mary Toppan), John Singleton Copley, 1763, Oil on canvas, Yale University Art Gallery



Figure 3: James Warren, John Singleton Copley, about 1761-63, Oil on canvas, Museum of Fine Arts Boston



Figure 4: Portrait of Mrs. John Stevens (Judith Sargent, later Mrs. John Murray), John Singleton Copley, 1770-72, Oil on canvas, Terra Foundation for American Art

## Images



Figure 5: Abigail Smith Adams (Mrs. John Adams), Gilbert Stuart, 1800/1815, oil on canvas, The National Gallery of Art (Washington, D.C.)

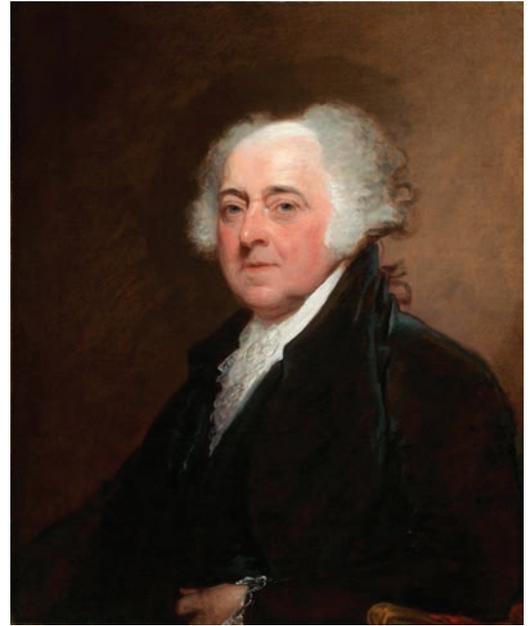


Figure 6: John Adams, Gilbert Stuart, 1800, oil on canvas, The National Gallery of Art (Washington, D.C.)



Figure 7: Mrs. Richard Yates, Stuart, Gilbert, 1793, Oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art (U.S.)

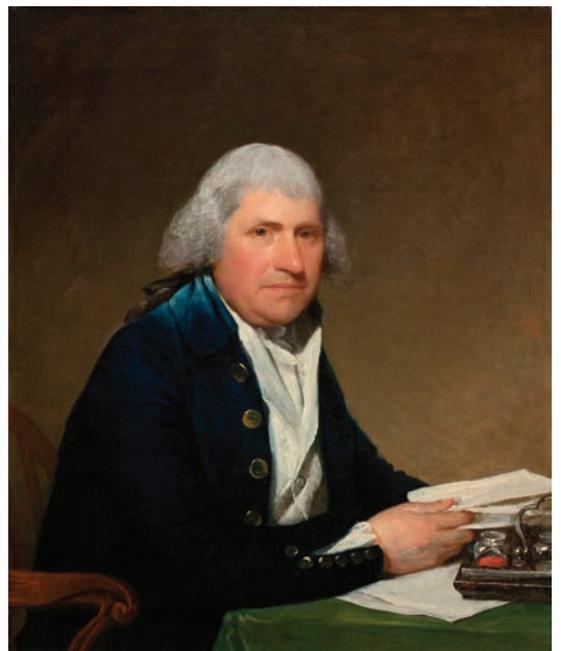


Figure 8: Richard Yates, Gilbert Stuart, 1793, oil on canvas, The National Gallery of Art (Washington, D.C.)