

2019

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Schroll, Tessa, "Mrs. Walter Stewart by Charles Willson Peale" (2019). *Writing Across the Curriculum*. 33.
https://digitalcommons.sacredheart.edu/wac_prize/33

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American Art AR-104-A Professor Joy Pepe October 4, 2018

Paper 1

Mrs. Walter Stewart by Charles Willson Peale

As I walked through the Yale Art Gallery in New Haven, I was struck by this painting by Charles Willson Peale. Among all the portraits in the grand room of American paintings, this one in particular has so much going on; from the background and setting to just the few small things in Deborah McClenachan's hands there was clearly a lot that the artist wanted to portray about this eighteen-year old girl.

Mrs. Walter Stewart by Charles Willson Peale was painted in 1782. The medium is oil on canvas and currently hangs at the Yale Art Gallery in Connecticut. As far as the provenance of the painting, I wasn't able to find much except that the painting was commissioned by Colonel Walter Stewart in 1781 and he asked Peale to paint his new bride who was a daughter of a wealthy Irish merchant from Philadelphia. Most clearly, the main object and focus of the painting is Mrs. Walter Stewart herself. She takes up nearly 3/4 of the entire painting, her arms are crossed and even though we can't see her precise pose one can assume since she is leaning against a counter or table, that she is in contrapposto. Starting at the top, her hair is styled half up and incredibly voluminous. A strand of small pearls or jewels run through her hair along with a blue strand, perhaps silk or ribbon. Already this symbolizes a sort of wealth and status. As the eye works its way down, Deborah's facial expression is calm and focused, yet gentle and joyful. Her eyes are fully opened looking straight at the painter/audience. Her head is tilted to left evoking a sense of casualness, and her lips are procuring an ever so slightly gentle smile. Her

cheeks are red, yet her skin is fair and even which goes to show her youthfulness and beauty. A few strands of her locks dangle on her neck and one curl in particular on the left collarbone draw the eye down towards her beautiful dress. This olive green, golden and ivory dress is painted extravagantly with folds at each turn which is helped by the light source streaming in from the left. The fabric is draped across her body which allows for reflections of color to be shown off. Underneath the olive cloak, Deborah is painted wearing an ivory dress with a blue ribbon; repeated from her hairstyle. Translucent lace peeks out below the dress and sleeves, and golden frilly material borders each end of her cloak. For Peale, it must have been a priority to paint such an extravagant costume to portray the wealth of this man who married Deborah. Although the colonel commissioned the painting to be of her, he didn't want to miss an opportunity to be included which is evident in Mrs. Walter Stewart's bracelet on her right arm. Here you can see a strand of 7 miniature pearls that lead up towards a portrait of Colonel Walter Stewart himself. Although small, it is placed perfectly in the center of the painting where the eye will lead you despite where you first look. I'm not precisely sure who the other portrait is of on her left hand, but clearly the mark of man couldn't go unnoticed in a painting of a woman.

As the eye scans from the portrait to the right, Deborah is gently holding a fan, again dotted with gold to show her class. According to a presentation on the history of fans, the fan "was seen as a symbol of luxury and elegance, and was an essential accessory in high-society wardrobes during

the 19th century” (The Mysterious Language of Fans, Google Arts & Culture). The linear line of the fan leads you right away to the table on which she leans; a table adorned with two apples, music sheets, books and a mandolin. The apple has many ways to be interpreted but in this scene, surrounded by ways of learning and education, they most likely represent

knowledge and wisdom as it did in the Garden of Eden. The sheets of music show that she is actively learning to play an instrument (most likely the Mandolin) and isn't afraid of showing that she enjoys the process of learning which is emphasized by the stack of two books on top of her music sheets. Most noticeable is the mandolin leaning against the books. While researching, I found a wide array of paintings of women holding mandolins although this is one of many where it is shown not being held but instead on the table. Also through reading, I found that the mandolin has certain ties to Ireland so it is then safe to say that perhaps Deborah wanted to include a piece of home since her father is Irish; a small reminder of her roots and where she is from.

Peale has painted Mrs. Walter Stewart in a grand, dome like room. The curvilinear lines in the top left where blue and beige meet suggest that she is in a round room or rotunda, which would only be found in a grand home estate. The walls are lined with oval portraits of landscape paintings, framed in exquisite golden borders. Peale's brushwork and craftsmanship is smooth yet tight and naturalistic. When seen in person, it is easy to notice the craquelure especially on the surface of her hands, neck and face. Overall, the painting is balanced and a pleasure to look at. The slight vignette around her body makes her the centerpiece of it all, and the dark shadows on the right and left of her help in that matter. Peale's use of chiaroscuro highlights the different shades of light and dark, from her dress to her surroundings. This difference in light and shade makes each object on the table seem so real that it can be nearly defined as trompe l'oeil; as if you could reach out your hand and grab an apple.

This painting has truly struck me, and I'm sure it did the same for Colonel Walters. Deborah is depicted as a studious, gentle and elegant woman who is hungry for knowledge and

learning, yet respectful of her husband's standing. Peale was able to strike the perfect balance of a woman who is cultivated, yet stands her ground and remembers her roots.

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