

## “Friend of My Heart”: Courtship and Marriage in Early America

### Charles Willson Peale’s “William Smith and Grandson”



After the American Revolution, the newly established United States offered exciting possibilities for individual freedom and political participation. Of course, this promise extended only to native-born or naturalized white males who owned land—men such as William Smith. Smith was a prominent Baltimore merchant and candidate for the first U.S. Congress when he sat for this portrait. Pictured at his country estate alongside his grandson, Smith is cast as a worthy contender for public office: a man who has cultivated his mind and his family as well as his property.

With so much power vested in “the people,” skeptics wondered whether Britain’s former subjects, now citizens of a republic, were prepared to perform their new duties, namely the task of electing their own government officials. Did they even recognize Smith’s qualifications? For the United States to endure, the citizenry had to put the common good above their own narrow interests. Where would Americans learn the virtues necessary to preserve this new and seemingly fragile form of government?

The answer, for many, was at home. In 18th-century thought, the institution of marriage was a microcosm of society. The long-held model of all-powerful husband and submissive wife came to be seen—much like the monarch’s oppressive rule over his subjects—as an obstacle to personal happiness. More appropriate for a young republic, the thinking went, was the relatively novel idea of “companionate marriage.” In a loving partnership governed by affection rather than fear, men would learn to balance their own desires with those of their mate. By practicing benevolence at home, they would become better citizens.

As voters and office holders, men like William Smith were the major players in this new political landscape. Women were largely excluded from the public stage, but their role in the early republic was nonetheless a vital one. Perceived as the more virtuous gender, American women were charged with inspiring their spouses, suitors, and sons to moral conduct. At a time when the nation’s fate was closely linked to the virtue of its citizens, female influence was considered a powerful force, especially during courtship.

*William Smith and His Grandson*, 1788, Charles Willson Peale (British American, 1741 - 1827), oil on canvas, 51.25 x 40.375 in. (130.18 x 102.55 cm.). Robert G. Cabell III and Maude Morgan Cabell Foundation and the Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Fund 75.11

### **A Newlywed's View**

What might a companionate marriage look like? This newlywed's glowing description, written to a cousin who has spoken "contemptuously of the married state," offers one example.

*Dear Cousin,*

I have now changed my name, and instead of liberty, must subscribe wife. . . . I have been married to my dear Charles these three months, and I can freely acknowledge that I . . . never knew happiness till now. To have a real friend to whom I can communicate my secrets, and who, on all occasions, is ready to sympathise with me, is what I never before experienced. All these benefits, my dear cousin, I have met with in my beloved husband. His principal care seems to be, to do everything possible to please me; and is there not something called duty incumbent on me? Perhaps you will laugh at the word duty, and say that it imports something like slavery; but nothing is more false; for even the life of a servant is as pleasant as any other, when he obeys from motives of love instead of fear. For my own part, my dear, I cannot say that I am unwilling to be obedient, and yet I am not commanded to be so by my husband.---You have often spoke contemptuously of the married state, and I believe your reasons were, that most of those whom you knew were unhappy; but that is an erroneous way of judging. It was designed by the Almighty, that men and women should live together in a state of society, that they should become mutual helps to each other; and if they are blest with children, to assist each other in giving them a virtuous education. Let me therefore beg that my dear cousin will no longer despise the state for which she was designed, and which is calculated to make her happy. . . . Let me beg that you will come and spend a few weeks with us; and if you have any taste for rural and domestic life, I doubt not but you will be pleased.

*I am your affectionate Cousin.*

## Teapot and stand



Tea drinking was an immensely popular activity in the early years of the American republic. Few could afford exquisite vessels such as the neoclassical teapot, created by Paul Revere II, that you see here. Still, many middle- and upper-class Americans shared the familiar ritual of preparing and drinking this hot, fragrant beverage. Their pleasure was not without risk, however. Careless tea drinkers, much like courting couples, could be easily burned.

For the men and women who came of age after the Revolution, selecting a marriage partner was the most important decision of their lives. In generations past, parents had played a decisive role in these negotiations. But over the course of the 18th century, young people gained more independence in their choices. And romantic love—based on mutual affection and companionship—became the ideal.

Putting love at the center of courtship also raised the stakes. Men became more vulnerable to personal rejections. For women, the perils were greater. A string of broken engagements could cast the woman as a flirt—a “coquette” in the language of the day—or, worse, prompt speculation about her virtue. A marriage entered into too hastily held its own dangers. A woman’s husband largely determined the comforts and privileges she would enjoy as a wife. While he could participate in the public world of commerce and politics, she had only the home she created with him from which to draw happiness.

Discovering the personality of a potential spouse could be a delightful adventure—conducted through breathless dances, nighttime walks and, of course, intimate cups of tea—but it was also a serious matter that demanded careful consideration.

*Teapot and Stand*, ca. 1790 – 95, Paul Revere II (British American, Boston, Massachusetts, 1735 - 1818), silver; wood handle, 6.25 x 11.75 x 3.625 (teapot) in./1 x 7.375 x 5.25 (stand) in. (15.88 x 29.85 x 9.21 [teapot] cm./2.54 x 18.73 x 13.34 [stand] cm.). Gift of Daniel D. Talley III, Lilburn T. Talley, and Edmund M. Talley in memory of their mother, Anne Myers Talley, and the Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Fund 91.392a-b

**Female Influence:  
Being the Substance of an Oration Delivered at the Annual  
Commencement of Columbia College, May 6, 1795**

While “Female Influence” might seem to be an unusual topic for a commencement address at a men’s college, the speaker—like many Americans in the newly formed republic—saw the personal relationships between men and women as a matter of national concern. That New York Magazine subsequently published the oration suggests that the topic indeed held broad public interest.

For the young nation to fulfill the Revolution’s ideals, its citizens would have to behave virtuously in public and private life. “Liberty is never sure,” the speaker warned, “till Virtue reigns triumphant!” Women were critical to this reformation in manners; by upholding the highest standards of conduct, their “auspicious influence” would help “banish vice and folly from the earth.” As wives and mothers, they might persuade husbands and children, but it was during courtship that their power was greatest.

Love and courtship, it is universally allowed, invest a lady with more authority than in any other situation falls to the lot of human beings. She can mold the taste, the manners, and the conduct of her admirers, according to her pleasure. . . . In fine, she can exalt them from mediocrity to the most distinguished rank in worth and virtue. Who has not heard of the noblest deeds achieved, the most shining characters formed, the most brilliant reputation acquired, by means of a virtuous attachment to a woman of merit? What passion has ever wrought wonders as that of love? . . . By the judicious management of this noble passion . . . what almost miraculous reformation may be brought about?

### Charles Willson Peale's "Mrs. Benjamin Harrison (Elizabeth Page)"



As the mistress of Brandon, a large plantation south of the James River, Elizabeth Page Harrison—both in person and in her portrait—reflected the wealth and social standing of her husband, Benjamin. Wearing a sumptuous dress and a refined expression, Mrs. Harrison exemplifies the spirit of gentility prized by elite colonial Virginians. The lush, green fields stretching behind Betsy—as she was known to loved ones—allude to a primary source of wealth in the New World: tobacco.

Charles Willson Peale's portrait also links the Harrisons to the traditions of Old Europe. With her arm resting gracefully upon a monumental stone column—an imaginary feature—Betsy's pose recalls images of British aristocracy. Traditionally, a portrait like this would hang alongside pictures of illustrious ancestors and the household's young children—an imposing display that demonstrated the family's past roots and future promise. Peale's 1775 portrait hints at the beginning of the next generation. Although the Harrisons were childless at the time, the rose blossoms secured to Betsy's dress, including a small unopened bud, suggest that she was expecting a child.

The gentry's influence in the colony increased through intermarriage with other elite families. Bonds of blood and matrimony created a network of shared social, political, and financial interests that was a powerful force in Virginia before and after the Revolution. These connections could also be strengthened through death. The loss of a husband or wife—a common occurrence in this era—brought an opportunity to form additional familial links through remarriage. Benjamin Harrison's three marriages united him with some of the most notable names in the colony. The Harrison family tree became even more complicated when Lucy—Benjamin's daughter and Betsy's only child—married the brother of her father's third wife.

*Mrs. Benjamin Harrison (Elizabeth Page)*, 1775, Charles Willson Peale (British American, 1741 - 1827), oil on canvas, 52 1/8 x 42 9/16 in. (132.4 x 108.1 cm.). Gift of Mrs. Douglas Crocket 86.170

## John Trumbull's "Captain Samuel Blodget in Rifle Dress"



Like many veterans, Samuel Blodget sought to commemorate his participation in the nation's founding. Nearly ten years after his service in the New Hampshire militia, the successful businessman hired John Trumbull to paint his portrait.

Trumbull, who would go on to paint some of the most iconic images of the Revolution, captures the handsome officer as he gestures away from his fellow soldiers—seen as small background figures to his right. Striding eagerly forward, this spry figure seems a fitting representative for a new republic with a promising future ahead.

Yet this hardly looks like a typical military portrait. With his graceful pose and snowy white costume fringed with lace, the young captain might seem more suited to a ballroom than a battlefield. Blodget's stance, with one foot delicately extended backward and arms effortlessly raised, demonstrates his expertise in the 18th-century art of movement: the elegant carriage of the body in everyday life. For the upper classes, and for those who aspired to join their ranks, there were precise rules for every conceivable type of movement: walking, sitting, dancing, engaging in conversation, even standing still. With the help of etiquette books and lessons from dance masters, children from a very young age learned to discipline their bodies until these movements appeared effortless. In attracting a mate, young men and women would strive to attain the poise exemplified by the older, married Blodget.

*Captain Samuel Blodget in Rifle Dress*, ca. 1786, John Trumbull (British American, 1756 - 1843), oil on canvas, 21 3/16 x 17 1/8 in. (53.8 x 43.5 cm). The J. Harwood and Louise B. Cochrane Fund for American Art 2001.2

## Looking Glass



In those first years after the Revolution, did Americans give much consideration to trivial matters like personal appearance? With all the emphasis on virtue, sincerity, and companionship in the period's writings about marriage, one might be tempted to answer no. But beauty and fashion were far from forgotten. Even Thomas Jefferson counseled his daughter to attend to her appearance. In 1783, taking time away from his duties as Virginia's representative at the Continental Congress, he reminded Patsy that her clothes should always be "neat, whole, and properly put on." Although he did not wish her to be "gayly clothed at this time of life," he warned, "Nothing is so disgusting to men as a want of cleanliness and delicacy in women."

At the tender age of eleven, Patsy may have found her father's advice rather premature. Most young people did not begin participating in mixed social activities until they were teenagers. Opportunities to meet partners included dances, concerts, or outdoor pursuits like riding or picnicking. While many of these were group activities, couples were also permitted a considerable measure of privacy. After other family members made themselves scarce, an elegant looking glass such as this could reflect an exchange of intimacies between a young woman and her suitor left alone in the parlor.

*Looking Glass*, 1762 – 67, Attributed to John Elliot Sr. (British American, ca. 1713 – 1791), Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, or England, mahogany, veneered and gilded; pine, spruce; silvered glass, 43 x 16 in. (109.2 x 40.6 cm.). The Adolph D. and Wilkins C. Williams Fund 76.42.2

### **Thomas Jefferson's Advice to His Daughter**

In late 1783, Thomas Jefferson traveled to Annapolis to attend the Continental Congress. Having lost his wife the year before, Jefferson left his eldest daughter Martha, known as Patsy, in the care of a family friend during this absence. Soon after his arrival, Jefferson sent Patsy a lengthy letter detailing how she should spend her time while they were separated. He outlined a daily schedule of acceptable activities for the eleven-year-old: dancing, drawing, practicing music, writing French, reading English, and composing letters. Clearly concerned about the progress of his daughter's education, Jefferson urged the girl to be diligent in her studies and pointedly noted that these accomplishments "will render you more worthy of my love." The following month, Jefferson offered some sharply worded advice on the matter of dress.

I do not wish you to be gayly clothed at this time of life, but that your wear should be fine of its kind. But above all things and at all times let your clothes be neat, whole, and properly put on. . . . Be you, from the moment you rise till you go to bed, as cleanly and properly dressed as at the hours of dinner or tea. . . . A lady who has been seen as a sloven or a slut in the morning will never efface the impression she has made, with all the dress and pageantry she can afterwards involve herself in. Nothing is so disgusting to men as a want of cleanliness and delicacy in women. I hope, therefore, the moment you rise from bed, your first work will be to dress yourself in such style, as that you may be seen by any gentleman without his being able to discover a pin amiss, or any other circumstance of neatness wanting.

## Drop-front Secretary



With its elaborately decorated ivory surface, this fall-front secretary was a striking addition to the home of Anne and William Bingham. Its presence in Philadelphia attests to America's expanding role in international trade, which shaped fortunes and family life across the new republic. Global commerce entailed not only the circulation of ships and goods—providing a source of enormous wealth for the Binghams and other merchant families—but also the exchange of aesthetic ideas.

The secretary arrived in Philadelphia in 1784 aboard the first U.S. vessel to sail to India. Created in Vizagapatam specifically for export to the West, it combines native materials—ivory and sandalwood—with a quintessentially English furniture form. Similarly, incising sheets of ivory and filling the grooves with black lac was a technique originating in Vizagapatam, while the lively surface images reflect both Indian sources—such as chintz fabric patterns—and Western architectural prints.

Of course, the secretary's eclectic mix of styles and sources would not have been possible without countless sailors crisscrossing the oceans throughout the 18th century. Upon their return, seamen might bring gifts of scrimshaw, a popular art reminiscent of the Binghams' remarkable secretary. While far less grand, these pieces of ivory etched with boats and other maritime themes during the sailors' moments of leisure became treasured souvenirs.

*Drop-front Secretary*, ca. 1780, artisan unknown, Vizagapatam (Vishakhapatnam), India, sandalwood, veneered with incised ivory panels filled with black lac; silver and brass pulls, brass hinges, 53 x 30 5/8 x 13 5/8 in. (134.6 x 77.8 34.6 cm.). The Adolph D. and Wilkins C. Williams Fund 2001.231a-b

## Desk and Bookcase



To walk into an early 19th-century parlor and see a magnificent desk and bookcase such as this—often the largest and costliest piece of furniture in a home—immediately signaled the presence of a letter writer. Until the invention of e-mail and text messages, letters were the most common form of written communication. Except for penmanship (a skill especially valued in women), letters were like their modern-day replacements in conveying far more than what appeared on the page. Contents and style reflected a writer's training and education—from basic literacy to the types of books, events, and interests mentioned. Of course, letters were also an opportunity for personal revelations, which made them an important part of courtship rituals. It was not uncommon for 19th-century lovers to exchange letters during separations of only a few hours;

longer periods apart could generate volumes of correspondence. In an era that favored sincerity over superficial charms, these missives helped a young man or woman gauge a suitor's character or test the strength of an admirer's affection.

For those uncertain how to conduct a courtship by mail, advice on letter writing could be found in etiquette books, women's publications, and even popular novels—many of which were written as a series of letters. This prescriptive literature addressed all manner of romantic difficulties: a lover's indifference, suspicions of infidelity, an unwelcome proposal, or a suitor in search of fortune rather than love. What better place to keep both letters and books than this stately piece of furniture? Many desks of the period include hidden drawers—ideal places for the most private correspondence.

*Desk and Bookcase*, 1800 – 1815, artisan unknown, Shenandoah Valley, Virginia, cherry, various inlaid woods; poplar, pine, 105 x 38 1/4 x 21 in. (266.7 x 97.2 x 53.3 cm.). Mary Norton Parsons Fund for American Decorative Arts 79.73

## How to Write a Letter

*The Columbian Letter-Writer*, published in 1811, was one of many guides that promised the young men and women of America instruction in the art of correspondence. The author assures his readers that letters are merely a record of what would otherwise be expressed in conversation. However, achieving this “natural, easy style” requires some work. In addition to reading and writing every day, the “young student” should think through each letter before ink touches paper. Once written, letters should be revised so that “neither bad spelling, bad grammar, or improper words” remain.

Such high standards are not surprising, given the serious issues these letters addressed. This young man’s proposal demonstrates how a well-written note can solve life’s problems—or make matters worse.

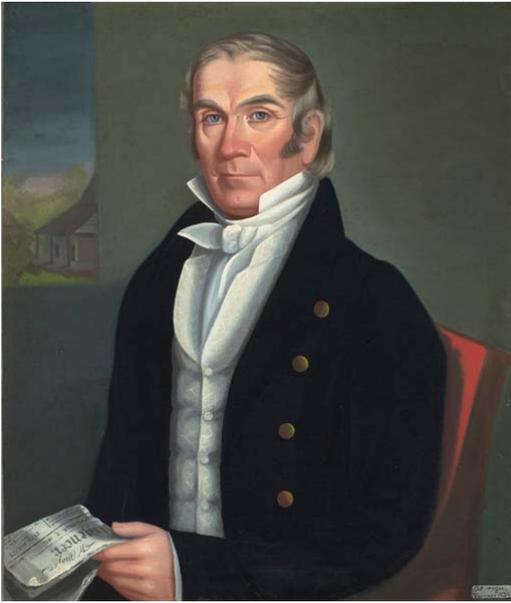
*Madam,*

I have three times attempted to give you a verbal relation of the contents of this letter; but my heart as often failed. . . . I am not precipitate, madam, nor would I desire your hand, if your heart did not accompany it. My circumstances are independent, and my character hitherto unblemished, of which you shall have the most undoubted proof. You have already seen some of my relations at your aunt’s, in -----, particularly my mother, with whom I now live. Your aunt will inform you concerning our family, and if it is to your satisfaction, I shall not only consider myself as extremely happy, but shall also make it the principal study of my future life to spend my days in the company of her whom I do prefer to all others in the world. I shall wait for your answer with the utmost impatience and am,

*Your profound admirer.*

The young woman who received this letter responded cautiously. Since her suitor had not shared his intentions with his family, she feared the offer might not be genuine. Only a second letter, conveying his mother’s approval of the match, won her acceptance.

## Thomas Jefferson Wright's "William Major" and "Elizabeth Thatcher Corbin Major"



These 1831 portraits of Elizabeth and William Major offer a glimpse into the expectations for husbands and wives in the early republic. Behind William's imposing figure is a wood-frame house, a sign of his status as a landowner and—in an era when only property holders were allowed to vote—a full citizen. As a responsible citizen, William was expected to manage Fairview plantation's 2,000 acres while also following the political and economic developments shaping Culpeper County, the Commonwealth of Virginia, and the young nation. That he chose to be painted with a copy of *The National Intelligencer*, with the column "From Europe" prominently displayed, suggests just how far his interests extended.

In contrast, Elizabeth Major's concerns appear to focus inward. Pictured with one hand resting on the Bible and a pair of reading glasses easily within reach, her image alludes to a wife's prescribed role as the moral and spiritual compass of her family. Through instruction, gentle persuasion, and personal example, American women were charged with inspiring their husbands and children to follow the path of virtue. The seat of their influence was the family home—a refuge from the rapidly developing commercial market with its focus on worldly goods and self-interest.



Of course, this stark separation between home and market along the lines of gender was an ideal. As the mistress of Fairview, Elizabeth Major's duties touched both realms. In addition to caring for her husband and nine children, she saw to the health, food, clothing, and shelter of the plantation's seventy-one enslaved laborers—a vital contribution to what was officially her husband's business. Following William's death, Elizabeth assumed even greater responsibility; much to the dismay of her grown sons, she handled the plantation's finances for the next two decades.

*William Major of "Fairview" Plantation, Culpeper County, Virginia, 1831, Thomas Jefferson Wright (American, 1798 - 1846), oil on canvas, 28 1/8 x 24 in. (71.1 x 61 cm.). The Adolph D. and Wilkins C. Williams Fund 88.61.1/2*

*Elizabeth Thatcher Corbin Major of "Fairview" Plantation, Culpeper County, Virginia, 1831, Thomas Jefferson Wright (American, 1798 - 1846), oil on canvas, 28 1/8 x 24 in. (71.1 x 61 cm.). The Adolph D. and Wilkins C. Williams Fund 88.61.2/2*

## Key Basket



In the decades before the Civil War, Southern brides might receive a leather key basket such as this finely made example that bears the initials of its original owner, "M. J. E." Today counted among the rarest and most localized forms of American folk art, baskets such as this were created in Virginia and North Carolina. Embellished with hearts, stars, diamonds and sheaves of wheat—symbols of love, prosperity, and eternity—this sturdy container reflects the romantic hopes of a young bride. Yet it was also a very practical gift suited to her new responsibilities as mistress of the household. Soon to be filled with heavy keys to doors, chests, and cupboards, the basket attests to the wife's management of the home and her control over its contents, ranging from precious objects to

ordinary yet valuable foodstuffs.

In many Southern households, enslaved laborers were dependent upon the generosity of their masters and mistresses for food—whether it came as a weekly ration of cornmeal, salt herring, and pork or as access to land for hunting, fishing, or cultivating a kitchen garden. By the same token, slaves who wished to marry required the permission of their owners, though even with this blessing, their unions were not legally recognized. Nevertheless, marriage ceremonies were a cause for celebration in the community, and unions between enslaved men and women began with similar hopes of enduring love and good fortune.

*Key Basket, ca. 1830-60, artisan unknown, possibly Richmond, Virginia, leather, embossed, appliquéd, and stitched, 9 x 9 x 6 in. (22.9 x 22.9 x 15.2 cm.). Gift of Franklin P. Watkins and Miriam Hill (by exchange) 95.80*

## Blanket Chest



Once a courting couple announced their engagement, the bride-to-be would set to work outfitting her new home. This often included stitching table linens and bedding to fill a dower chest—like this brilliantly painted example. After her wedding, a woman focused mainly on managing the household—either through her own labor or that of waged or enslaved servants. However, by the early 19th century the expectations for wives and mothers were changing.

The American Revolution spurred a public dialogue about women's nature, their intellectual abilities, and the part they should play in the new republic. Patriotic women had supported the war effort by organizing boycotts of British goods, making uniforms for Continental soldiers, and participating in street protests. Some followed their husbands and brothers to war, providing support and comfort in military camps. In rare cases, they fought in battle or acted as spies among enemy troops.

After the war, civic-minded women—though denied the vote—were encouraged to help prepare husbands, brothers, and sons to be good citizens by instilling in them a concern for the common good. Such duties required a more robust education than instruction in traditional feminine accomplishments like needlework. The decades after the Revolution saw an increase in female literacy and the founding of hundreds of public and private schools. Institutions such as the Richmond Female Academy, which opened in 1807, included courses in Latin, Greek, mathematics, history, and natural philosophy. Imagine the newly engaged young woman who might have tucked away a few essays about republican ideals alongside embroidered pillow cases as she packed her dower chest.

*Blanket Chest*, ca. 1795, artisan unknown, Lebanon or Berks County, Pennsylvania, pine, painted, 24 3/4 x 48 x 22 1/4 in. (62.8 x 121.9 x 56.5 cm.). The Adolph D. and Wilkins C. Williams Fund 77.96

### A Young Woman's School Schedule

Mary Ann Hunt, who was the daughter of a wealthy planter in Mississippi, described her rigorous school schedule in a journal entry dated October 1, 1834.

Monday rose at five, prepared my lessons to recite . . . We breakfasted at seven, at eight we assembled for school, during the morning recited several lessons which were very interesting, particularly Philosophy to which study I am very partial; at twelve school dismissed, we then took calisthenics in the upper hall . . . Dined at one, at two school commenced, we attended reading, writing and French, from four to five took my music lesson . . . Tea . . . At seven I returned to my room to prepare my recitations for the following day, retired at eleven.

### Mourning Locket



The tiny size of this mourning locket belies the enormous loss it commemorates. The Jameson family laid to rest their eleven-month-old son, known only by the letter “D.” The anguished mother, whose initials, “J.J.,” appear on the back of the locket, could look at it to remember her baby when he was alive, but the presence of the skull and crossbones served as a reminder of his death.

The loss of a child, particularly an infant, was a common tragedy in 19th-century America. One out of every four or five white children did not reach adulthood. For those born into slavery, childhood was even more perilous, with fewer than half surviving to maturity. And while children were especially vulnerable, every stage of life carried some risk. Illness, accidents, and—for women—childbirth could prove deadly.

Mourning objects offered a small measure of solace. Miniature portraits of the deceased, copied from images produced when they were alive or drawn after death, were commissioned to keep an absent loved one close. These mementos often incorporated locks of hair, which retain their familiar color and

texture after death. Intricately woven or braided strands accented with small pearls or gold, possibly mingled with the mourner's own hair, could be inserted in the frame back. In more generic scenes like this one, a lock of hair might be scattered beneath the urn or arranged as the branches of a willow tree—an immensely popular symbol because of its capacity to grow after being cut. Displayed publicly, these objects honored a family's loss. Locketts were also ideal as private expressions of grief, a daily remembrance worn close to the heart.

*Mourning Locket*, 1788, artisan unknown, gold; watercolor on ivory; glass, 1 1/2 x 1 1/8 in. (3.8 x 2.9 cm.).  
Bequest of Miss Mamie LaRue 60.15.1

### James Peale's "John Parke Custis"



Portrait miniatures—like this one of Martha Washington's son, John Parke Custis—were quite popular during the early republic. As an art form linked to the English court, the miniature could be displayed, either inside the home or as a piece of jewelry, to signal one's wealth, aristocratic tastes, and family lineage. However, their small size also made them perfect for private—even secret—viewing. Often exchanged between lovers during courtship or in expectation of a husband and wife's temporary separation, these portraits were usually intended for a singular audience; they reveal the gaze of love.

The first portrait miniature by an American-born artist was a young man's self-portrait, completed in 1758. Benjamin West offered it, encased in a silver locket, to Elizabeth Steele of Philadelphia along with his hand in marriage. She accepted the gift but declined the proposal when her mother objected to his profession. Mrs. Steele could not have known that West would eventually find fame in London, where he would be appointed "History Painter to the King." The first American artist to win international acclaim, Benjamin West produced a body of work that encompassed royal portraits, genre scenes such as VMFA's *Three Ladies Making Music* and, most notably, history paintings such as *Caesar Reading the History of Alexander's Exploits*, another highlight of VMFA's collection. However, he would never undertake another miniature portrait during his long career.

*John Parke Custis*, ca. 1772, James Peale (British American, 1749-1831), watercolor on ivory, 2 1/2 x 2 in. (6.4 x 5.1 cm.) Gift of Mrs. A. Smith Bowman and her brother Robert E. Lee IV 76.21.2

**Charles B. J. F vret de Saint-M min’s “Robert Greenhow Jr.”**



Robert Greenhow, Jr., was just eight years old when Charles B. J. F vret de Saint-M min created this winsome pastel and crayon likeness. Robert and his parents were among 120 affluent Virginians who flocked to the French artist’s studio during his year-long visit to Richmond. To make such naturalistic portraits, Saint-M min relied on a mechanical device called a physiognotrace, which created a precise outline of the sitter’s profile. The artist then sketched in the features and costume by hand. Using a pantograph, Saint-M min could also reduce the large drawing within a two-inch circle on a copper plate to produce engraved prints.

That the Greenhows were wealthy enough to commission three portraits from Saint-M min set them apart from most Virginians. However, what was surely more noteworthy to young Robert was his status as an only child. Although birthrates began to decline after 1800, it was not uncommon for a woman to bear at least seven children during her lifetime. Since most women married in their early twenties and had few options for controlling conception, their adult lives were dominated by the cycle of pregnancy and childbirth. Indeed, the prospect of having children—with all the risk and responsibility that came with motherhood—spurred some brides to prolong their engagements.

Without the company of brothers and sisters, Robert’s childhood may have seemed remarkably quiet—all the more so with the passing of his mother a few years later. Mary Ann perished in the Richmond Theatre fire of 1811; Robert and his father escaped.

*Robert Greenhow Jr.*, ca. 1808, Charles B. J. F vret de Saint-M min (French, 1770 - 1852), pastel and crayon on toned paper, 18 3/8 x 14 in. (47.9 x 35.6 cm.). Gift of Mrs. William R. Scott 98.3.3/3

## Richmond Theatre Fire: December 26, 1811

On the night of December 26, 1811, the Richmond Theatre was packed with some 600 patrons. At the beginning of the second act, sparks of fire appeared at the rear of the stage. A chandelier, whose flame was not extinguished before it was drawn up, likely ignited the blaze. Robert Greenhow's mother was one of seventy-two people who perished in the fire. Below is a moving account, given by Robert Greenhow Sr., of how he and his son escaped the Theatre.

My wife! My wife! & friend of my heart, of my best & warmest affections. In the full tide of Health, looking better than I had seen her for some months! My wife for near 26 ½ years! . . . Suddenly & in a moment unlooked for & unexpected taken without one Sad last parting Adieu from my very arms! . . . So soon as the first flakes were seen to descend, Save my child! the last words I heard her pronounce. I caught my Son up, and in a minute pressed to Suffocation we were Immovably planted in the midst of a pressing, overwhelming throng, where for the space I suppose of 4 minutes we were; then with him in my arms thrown to the floor. While thus prostrate a blast of flame & smoke was inhaled by us both, and so great was its Influence that my arms let go their hold, My son in a convulsive throe wrested himself from my grasp & exclaimed, "Oh, Father! I am dying!" This roused me from my state of almost Insensibility. My reply was, "My Son, I will die with you!" Dark as midnight, my hand involuntarily seized the shirt of his coat.

I got him again in my hold. When we were kicked to the head of the Stair case, finding myself there still prostrate, not being able to rise, I gave my Body a Sudden Impulse that carried us over the Dead & dying Bodies & pieces of flaming wood that the steps were crowded with, and in that manner, with him in my arms, got to the lower floor, when, reanimated by the air rushing in at the Doors, I got up & most miraculously, & unhurt, placed myself & child out of Danger. I instantly returned to search for my wife, but Death & destruction inevitable urged me back. Where my wife was, whether saved or not, I could not tell. . . . but oh! Sad to tell, the fatal mandate had issued! Farewell, my friend.

Y'r Afflicted,

R. Greenhow

In the wake of the fire, the *Richmond Enquirer* reported that "the whole town is shrouded in woe." Businesses were closed for two days by a city ordinance while public shows, spectacles, and dancing were forbidden for the next four months. As a memorial to the fire's victims, Monumental Church was erected in 1814 on the E. Broad Street site. The victims' ashes still reside in a crypt beneath the church's floorboards.

## Thomas Hart Benton's "Brideship (Colonial Brides)"



Thomas Hart Benton's *Brideship* looks back to an exceptional story of courtship in colonial Virginia. Between 1620 and 1621, the Virginia Company dispatched five ships carrying 147 "younge, handsome, and honestly educated Maides" from England to serve as brides for the lonely settlers at Jamestown. Investors paid for their passage, outfitting the women with clothing and a modest trousseau in hopes of turning a handsome profit once a match was made. In exchange for a wife and the promise of an apprentice to follow, new husbands were to pay 150 pounds of tobacco.

Although Benton's painting condenses this transaction to a few moments on a bustling wharf, his composition captures a prospective bride's ambivalence about her fate. With roots in the artisan and gentry classes, these "tobacco brides" might have been desirable marriage partners at home if money had not been an issue. However, as widows, orphans, and youngest daughters, the women had few protectors or economic resources. Their prospects in Virginia were not much better; those who survived an Indian attack in March 1621 faced starvation and death during the winter of 1622.

Benton's depiction of this matchmaking scheme some 300 years later coincided with a resurgence of interest in America's colonial period reignited by the 1876 Centennial. The Colonial Revival permeated all segments of society, from preservation efforts like the restoration of Colonial Williamsburg to the renewed popularity of traditional styles in architecture and the fine and decorative arts.

A similar juxtaposition of past and present is evident in the painting itself. The red-haired bride's hat is a fitting style for the 1920s but hardly in keeping with colonial-era fashions. Its inclusion is a subtle nod to Benton's own wife, Rita, who made hats to supplement the family's income.

*Brideship (Colonial Brides)*, ca. 1927-28, Thomas Hart Benton (American, 1889-1975), oil and egg tempura on canvas, mounted on composite board, 60.25 x 42.125 in. (152.88 x 107 cm.). Gift of R. Crosby Kemper and Museum Purchase, the J. Harwood and Louise B. Cochrane Fund for American Art 98.28

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