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CHECKLIST

Louis Leopold Boilly, French, 1761–1845
Young Woman Reading in a Landscape
(*Jeune Femme Lisant dans un Paysage*)
1798

Black chalk with sanguine highlights
Purchased through the Florence and Lansing Porter Moore
1937 Fund; D.2003.19

Ralph Earl, American, 1751–1801
Portrait of a Lady
1784

Oil on canvas
Purchased through the Katharine T. and Merrill G. Beede 1929
Fund, the Phyllis and Bertram Geller 1937 Memorial Fund, the
Mrs. Harvey P. Hood W18 Fund, the Guernsey Center Moore 1904
Memorial Fund, the Robert J. Strassenburgh II 1942 Fund,
the Julia L. Whittier Fund, the Hood Museum of Art Acquisitions
Fund, and through gifts by exchange; P.990.43

Thomas Watson, British, 1748–1781,
after Joshua Reynolds, British, 1723–1792
Mrs. Crewe
1773

Mezzotint on laid paper
Gift of Robert Dance, Class of 1977; PR.2003.59

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HOOD MUSEUM OF ART

Designed by Christina Nadeau, DPMS



Thomas Watson, after Joshua Reynolds, *Mrs. Crewe*, 1773 (detail).

F E M I N I N E G E N I U S

Sensibility, Sensuality, and Sense in Eighteenth-Century Portraiture

Let us agree here to use the term “genius” to describe those who force us to discuss their story because it is so closely bound up with their [creation], in the innovations that support the development of thought and beings, and in the onslaught of questions, discoveries, and pleasures that their [creation has] inspired.

—Julia Kristeva, *Hannah Arendt*



Ralph Earl, *Portrait of a Lady*, 1784.

Since the onset of modernity, women have forcefully combated the notion that they are innately less intelligent than men, yet traces of this inferiority complex have nonetheless persisted to the present day. With the emergence of environmental psychology in the late seventeenth century came the idea that both genders undergo equal mental development, and that alleged innate differences are in fact societal constructs: in other words, human beings are made, not born. This new psychological paradigm provided women with a basis to contest the stereotypical roles men had earlier ascribed to them, asserting that they could be equal to men if provided with a proper education. During the latter half of the eighteenth century, across several different cultures—including France, Britain, and America—formally constructed gender social roles were called into question.

Feminine Sensibility. This situation, coupled with a rising, self-conscious middle class, led to what many writers have termed the “Cult of Sensibility,” a phenomenon of the 1700s during which society championed feminine moral refinement. This period of reform was inevitably accompanied by a societal struggle to redefine the cultural constructions of masculinity and femininity. Women were expected to uphold traits of piety, purity, domesticity, and submissiveness—the four qualities that would later be known as the “Cult of True Womanhood.” Despite this celebration of feminine virtue, men established strict domains for the sexes, confining women to the domestic sphere and limiting their education. This idea of a defined feminine space is described in numerous conduct books written as guides for women at the time, including one by Dr. John Gregory, who advised women to veil any personality aspect that did not conform to the

ideals of submissive femininity: “If you happen to have any learning, keep it a profound secret, especially from the men” (31). Louis-Léopold Boilly’s *Young Woman Reading in a Landscape* exemplifies many of the concepts associated with the standards promoted by these cults.

Although the model bears a strong resemblance to Boilly’s wife, based on surviving portraiture, Boilly preserves her anonymity by assigning her the title of “young woman” in his salon entry, suggesting her as a female ideal. The young woman, reserved in her manner, displays a sense of submissiveness in her delicate pose, which exposes her as a mere ornament of decoration. Her piety is also stressed by the inclusion of a church in the background, and the dog beneath her constitutes a symbol of fidelity; her rightful domain is thus one of religion and family.

Feminine Sensuality. Despite the sharp increase in female literacy in the seventeenth century, the act of a woman reading was still seen as dangerously sensual. The French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, for instance, asserted that “no chaste girl reads novels” (485). The popular romance novels of the eighteenth century frequently contained sexually arousing content, allowing readers to envision their secret desires and wishes. The written word could thus cause a woman of sensibility to slip into sensuality, as evidenced by Ralph Earl’s *Portrait of a Lady*.

Principles of conduct at the time stipulated that a woman who engaged in direct eye contact with a man for an extended period would be considered uncouth or immoral. The demure, lingering gaze of Earl’s lady therefore reveals her sensual character, as does the drapery that bares her skin and leads the eye from her inviting stare down to her bosom. In her hands she holds a letter, a further reference to sensuality, for women were thought to be seduced and corrupted by the messages of desire that could be found in letters. Such ideas were forwarded by a fashionable novel of the time: a book of correspondence between the twelfth-century lovers Héloïse and Abélard, whose passionate letters sparked desire in all who read them. The presence of an unsealed letter thus alludes to the aroused nature of this woman’s thoughts.

Feminine Sense. Within this sensible and reformed society existed also a number of strong women who fought against the social roles that had been assigned to them. The engraving by Thomas Watson shown here was created after a painting by Sir Joshua Reynolds of Mrs. Crewe, wife of the First Lord Crewe. Hailed as the most stunning beauty of her time, Mrs. Crewe was a leader of the fashionable elite and much admired for her amiable wit. Even though her gender prevented her from formally engaging in politics, she was nonetheless a self-defined Whig hostess, a position that demanded both charm and intellect. These traits are also the focus of a poem composed as a verbal portrait of Mrs. Crewe: “Decked with that charm, how lovely wit appears / How graceful science, when that robe she wears! / Such too her talents, and her

bent of mind, / As speak a sprightly heart by thought refined” (Sheridan 107). In the Reynolds portrait, Mrs. Crewe is deeply engrossed in her novel, revealing her desire to gain insight and knowledge from the pages. It is apparent that she has been reading for a while, as her dog appears to be quite comfortably settled; she is also unaware of the viewer intruding into her space and keeps her focus on the text, indicating her refusal to be subjected to overt objectification.

Feminine Genius. Even though these women are portrayed within the boundaries of defined social roles, their presentation in these images also challenges these roles. All three portraits were created within twenty-five years of each other in three different countries, yet there exists an underlying harmony among them; for instance, all three women are represented in an outdoor setting, a place outside of their domestic world, and all three are engaged in the act of reading, despite the contemporary warnings against displaying intellect. Also, all three women, and particularly those by Boilly and Earl, clearly dominate their settings as they tower above the horizon, a strong artistic assertion that is often associated with power and ownership. It is by virtue of this strength, this step towards individuality and away from constructed ideals, that the artists reveal a sense of genius: “You are a genius to the extent that you are able to challenge the sociohistorical conditions of your identity” (Kristeva, *Colette*, 427). Despite the vast surroundings, each of the portraits confers an impression of intimacy that transcends the view. Perhaps this is because we empathize with these women’s predicaments, for many of the same issues of inequality, social roles, and gender identity are still present today.

—Kori Lisa Yee Litt ’05

Curatorial/Education Department Intern

Louis Leopold Boilly, *Young Woman Reading in a Landscape* (*Jeune Femme Lisant dans un Paysage*), 1798.

