

## SYMPOSIUM

### *Judith Sargent Murray and Gender Dynamics in the Early Republic*

National Portrait Gallery

8<sup>th</sup> and G Streets, N.W.

Washington, D.C.

Friday, October 19, 2:00 – 7:00 p.m.



PORTRAIT OF MRS. JOHN STEVENS (JUDITH SARGENT, LATER MRS. JOHN MURRAY)  
by John Singleton Copley  
Oil on canvas, c. 1769  
Image: 50 x 40 in. (127.0 x 101.6 cm)  
Frame: 56 1/4 x 46 1/8 in. (142.9 x 117.2 cm)  
Terra Foundation for American Art, Chicago  
Daniel J. Terra Art Acquisition Endowment Fund, 2006  
2006 Terra

In conjunction with the exhibition “A Will of Their Own: Judith Sargent Murray and Women of Achievement in the Early Republic,” the Smithsonian’s National Portrait Gallery will hold a public symposium on Friday, October 19, 2012, from 2:00 to 7:00 p.m. The exhibition highlights John Singleton Copley’s oil painting of Judith Sargent Murray (1751–1820) and seven other portraits of her notable female contemporaries. The loan of the Copley painting and the funds for this symposium are made possible through the generous support of the Terra Foundation for American Art. The symposium is open to the public and free of charge. A reception for participants and guests will conclude the day.

Please register at [NPGMurraySymposium@si.edu](mailto:NPGMurraySymposium@si.edu)

#### Symposium Schedule:

2:00 – Welcome from Wendy Wick Reaves, Interim Director, National Portrait Gallery and Frank H. Goodyear, Associate Curator of Photographs

2:10 – *Portrait of a Lady: Aspirations and Limitations in the World of Judith Sargent Murray*  
Sheila Skemp, Clare Leslie Marquette Professor of American History, University of Mississippi

John Singleton Copley’s portrait of Judith Sargent (later Judith Sargent Murray) was painted as she left her girlhood behind and prepared to marry her first husband, Gloucester merchant John Stevens. A signifier of both her gender and her class, the portrait gave observers no hint that she would one day become a published author and a produced playwright, known for her advocacy of the equality of women. It reflected the conventional aspirations of an elite young woman—marriage, motherhood, and an ordered, genteel existence. The portrait reflects at one and the same time Murray’s strengths and her weaknesses, even as it foreshadows her evolving construction of women’s place and identity in America and in the transatlantic world.

3:00 – *The Marriage Plot, or Copley’s Family Politics*

Jane Kamensky, Harry S. Truman Professor of American Civilization, Brandeis University

In 1769, eighteen-year-old Judith Sargent (later Judith Sargent Murray), the daughter of one of the most prosperous traders in Gloucester, Massachusetts, married her first husband, John Stevens, a failed merchant a decade her senior. Painted about the time of her marriage, John Singleton Copley’s spectacular three-quarter-length portrait of Judith Stevens commemorates the union, which would prove in many ways fateful for the young woman of letters. The painter of that picture also wed in 1769; in November, Copley, the son of a tobacco-seller and the stepson of an engraver, married Susannah Farnham Clarke, daughter of one of the wealthiest men in Boston. Copley had long been successful in his trade, but marriage made him rich. He built his house—a grand pile on the crest of Beacon Hill—upon the rock of the Clarke fortune. But he foundered on that rock as well. In a rapidly changing world, family ties begat political ties, often

in unpredictable ways. As the colonies fashioned themselves into a country, Copley's father-in-law, one of the consignees of the tea dumped in Boston Harbor in December 1773, became a traitor, an exile. Copley followed suit. His tender ties to Susannah Clarke and her family shaped his home, his country, and ultimately his art. Histories of women tend to dwell on home life; histories of men often ignore it. But we can't fully comprehend the shape of Copley's work or his citizenship without understanding his family ties. This paper explores the painter's entangled domestic, political, and artistic worlds during the era of the American Revolution.

3:50 – *Judith Sargent Murray's Genealogy of "Female Worthies"*

Rosemarie Zagarri, Professor of American History, George Mason University

A literary pioneer in the United States, Judith Sargent Murray was preceded in fame and accomplishment only by her good acquaintance Mercy Otis Warren. As exceptional as these women were, both Murray and Warren knew from their reading that world history had already provided many examples of women whose accomplishments had met or exceeded those of men. In a series of essays in *The Gleaner*, Murray identified some of these "female worthies," pointing to them as proof of women's natural equality with men. Murray's list included famous queens, poets, and scholars, along with women who were anonymous or much less well-known. This paper will examine Murray's list within the context of other genealogies of eminent women published in the eighteenth century in order to explore Murray's hopes and aspirations for the future of women in American society.

4:40 – Break

5:00 – *Dress, Body, and Identity in Copley's Portrait of Judith Sargent Murray*

Leslie Reinhardt, Independent Scholar, Washington, D.C.

A compelling work of great beauty, Copley's portrait of Judith Sargent Murray nonetheless disappoints the viewer looking for evidence of the sitter's life, character, or even daily dress. Instead, it offers a window into the sitter's culture and eighteenth-century artistic constructs of the ideal woman. This paper will discuss the image as part of the Anglo-American idiom of invented dress, a starkly gendered tradition that represented women in imagined terms of ideal beauty and female virtue, rather than the individuality and character so prized in portraits of men. In this respect it reflects the patriarchal culture Murray existed within. The substitution of studio draperies for actual fashion reflected the contemporary unease around luxury and consumption, both highly feminized, and its ambivalence about female display, while creating images of seductive beauty. Copley's particular work in this mode coexists with his forceful and famous naturalism.

5:50 – *Modeler, Mother, Politico, Spy: Patience Wright in Georgian London*  
Wendy Bellion, Associate Professor of American Art, University of Delaware

The British American wax modeler Patience Wright performed many roles during the American Revolutionary period. A talented sculptor, she dazzled audiences in colonial America and Georgian London with her lifelike doppelgangers of English luminaries. An outspoken advocate of American independence and a purported spy, she made her London studio into a political salon for British radicals and colonists abroad. And as the subject of numerous prints and paintings, she diversely figured as an allegory of Liberty, as a wistful executioner, and as a “Promethean modeler” capable of breathing life into wax. One image, a portrait painted by her son Joseph, illuminates the many roles Wright assumed in her artistic and political life. It also offers a point of departure for exploring the various ways in which Wright’s contemporaries represented her: as a sculptor, political woman, and female “genius.” Wright confounded ideas about art and gender in the late eighteenth century. As such, Wright’s biography offers a transatlantic context for exploring ideologies of gender and creativity during the era of Judith Sargent Murray.

6:40 – Group roundtable and questions

7:00 – Reception in the Kogod Courtyard, National Portrait Gallery