**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


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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. Strasenburgh 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*

**A Space for Dialogue and this brochure are made possible by a generous gift from the Class of 1948.**

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**HOOD MUSEUM OF ART**

Designed by Christina Nadeau, DPMS
Exemplifies many of the within this sensible and reformed society existed
culinity and femininity. Women were expected to uphold traits of piety,
feminine moral refinement. This period of reform was inevitably accompa-
conscious middle class, led to what many writers have termed the “Cult of 
education. During the latter half of the eighteenth centur y, across several 
guides for women at the time, including one by Dr. John Gregory, who 
defined feminine space is described in numerous conduct books written as 
women to the domestic sphere and limiting their education. This idea of a 
advised women to veil any personality aspect that did not conform to the 
ideas 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 
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 orna-
ment 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 Sensibility. 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 
direct eye contact with a man for an extended period would be con-
sidered 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 What 
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 grace-
ful science, when that robe she wears! / Such too her talents, and her 

Feminine Genius 
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

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 con-
structures: 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 con-
structed 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 accompa-
nied by a societal struggle to redefine the cultural constructions of mas-
culinity 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 
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A SPACE FOR DIALOGUE