

# Young America

## Reinventing Roles

**Overview:** After completing this activity, students will have a better understanding of the changing role of women in the new American Republic.

**Age Group/Grade Level:** 12-17 years, grades 7-12

**Subject Area:** Social Studies, History, Visual Arts

**Duration:** approximately 45 min.

### Background

Ralph Earl's portrait of Mary Wright Alsop is emblematic of a self-sufficient woman in the new American Republic. Alsop is shown seated in her mother's home, surrounded by items that speak to her wealth and position in society. Through the open window, we can view the Mattabesset River, a tributary of the Connecticut River, the waterway that was essentially the source of her wealth, as Mary and her husband, Richard, owned a mercantile business. During her lifetime, Mary raised ten children and ran her husband's mercantile business upon his early death in 1776. She also produced a remarkable amount of decorative needlework—a pastime usually reserved for women who had the time for such leisure activities.

### Discussion

Share Ralph Earl's *Mrs. Richard Alsop* with students. Consider beginning your conversation with the following questions:

- What do you see or notice in this artwork?
- What can those things tell us about the sitter?

Share the fact that most portraits from this time were status symbols, or ways to depict economic success. Hints to the life of the sitter are included for those "in the know." For instance, both the sitter's father and husband were in the mercantile business, which depended on river access to the sea, so the artist made sure to capture the river in the portrait.

- Which items did the artist seem to spend the most time capturing in detail? Why might the hand-embroidered lace have been so carefully documented?

Share the fact that, in 1776, Mary suddenly found herself a widow with a large estate to settle and ten children to raise, the oldest being fifteen years of age and the youngest only two months of age.

- What evidence of Mrs. Alsop's marital status did the artist include, if any?



Ralph Earl, *Mrs. Richard Alsop*, 1792, oil on canvas, 45 5/8 x 36 1/8 in., Museum purchase and gift of Joseph Alsop, 1975.49.1.

### Activity

The fact that Mary Alsop successfully took over her husband's mercantile business illustrates just how different she was from her contemporaries: most widows at the time had no previous experience with settling accounts, writing business letters, or handling legal questions.

- How has the artist depicted Mrs. Alsop as a woman capable of this undertaking?
- Mrs. Alsop never remarried and commissioned this portrait 16 years after her husband's death. What does this tell us about her? How might Mrs. Alsop's commission of this artwork have influenced the painter's depiction of his patron?

Have students research societal norms for women from the 1770s through the early 1800s in both the United States and England. Guide their research by asking:

- How were unmarried women different from married women in society's eyes? Under the law?
- How does the role of women in early American history compare with the revolutionary ideas of liberty and equality?
- How might this portrait have been different if the colonies had not won their independence from England?