Women as Readers: Visual Interpretations

LINDA J. DOCHERTY

THE PORTRAIT of Anne Pollard (fig. 1), one of the icons of early American painting, uses a book to define a type of female character. Traditionally seen as a document of Puritan history and an example of limner art, this 1721 likeness of a hundred-year-old woman also bears consideration for its iconography. Biography alone fails to explain the literary attribute. According to Pollard's obituary, she was born in Essex, England, came to the New World as young girl, and married a Boston innkeeper in 1643.[1] She bore her husband thirteen children and, after his death, continued to manage the tavern they had opened near the present site of Park Street Church. Pollard must have had a modicum of education, but hardly enough to justify portrayal with a symbol of authorship and learning most commonly

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[1] For biographical information on Anne Pollard, see *Witness to America's Past: Two Centuries of Collecting by the Massachusetts Historical Society*, exh. cat. (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society and Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 1991), 56–57.

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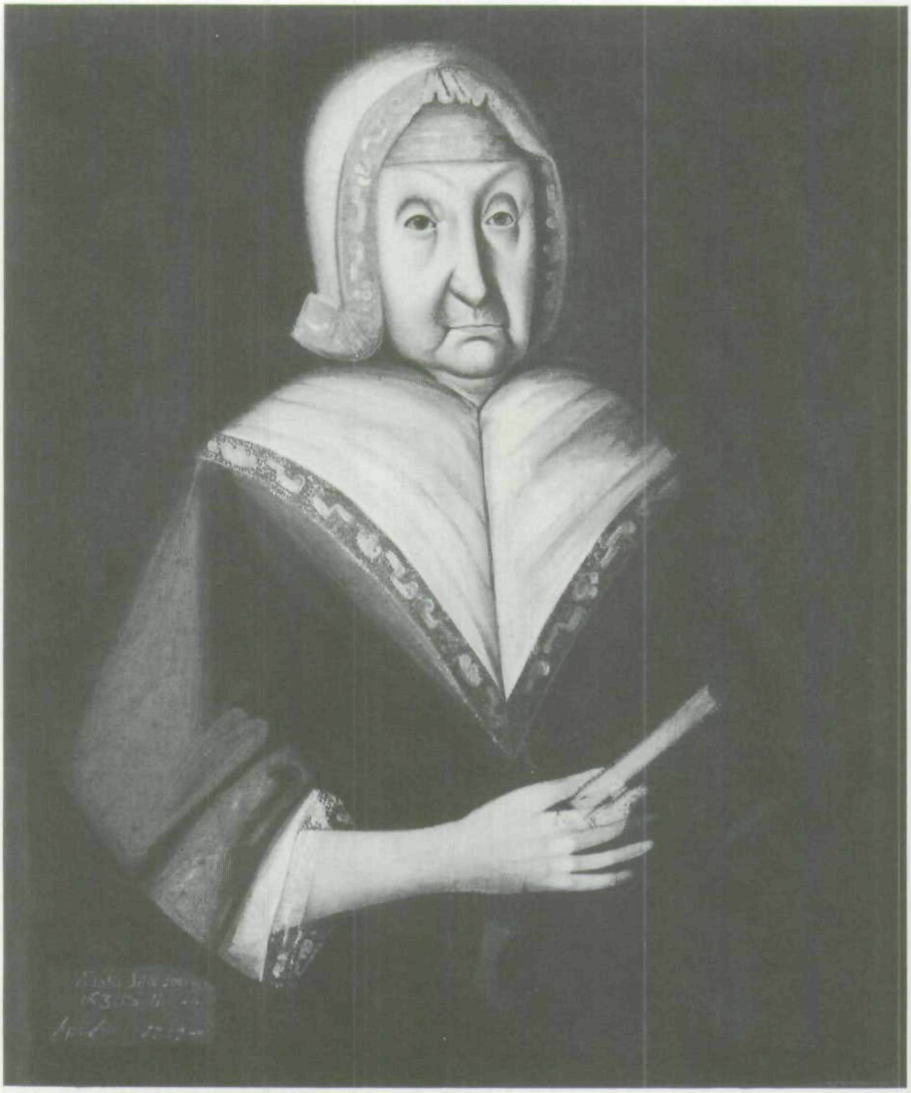

Fig. 1. Unknown artist, *Anne Disson (Mrs. William) Pollard*, 1721. Oil on canvas. Courtesy Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston.

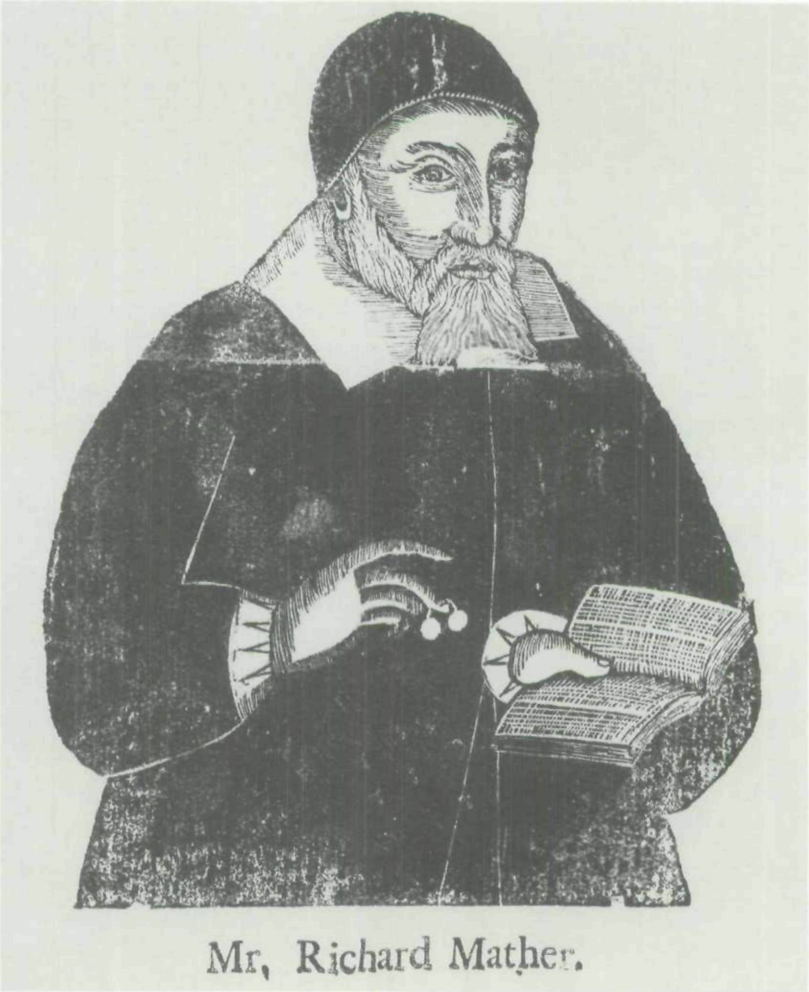
Mr, Richard Mather.

Fig. 2. John Foster, *The Reverend Richard Mather*, 1670. Woodcut. American Antiquarian Society.

used in colonial art for images of Puritan divines.[2] Nonetheless, the painting of the tavernkeeper's widow closely resembles John Foster's 1670 woodcut of the Reverend Richard Mather (fig. 2) in composition, elements, and sobriety.[3] The two works convey a similar idea of venerability, yet comparison reveals the impersonal aspect of the female portrait. While the clergyman holds an open book in one hand and pince-nez in the other, the centenarian holds a closed book and, despite her hundred years, no glasses. Though she is represented as a reader, Anne Pollard's access to books was both historically and artistically controlled.

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[2] On the book as a symbol, see James Hall, *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art*, rev. ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 50–51.

Artists in America have long used books as a means of characterizing women while holding the power reading implies at bay. From the colonial period to the beginning of World War I, the relationship between readers and texts in American painting evolved steadily in conjunction with changing social norms and artistic tastes. This evolution did not follow a single course; over time, painters created increasingly disparate types of images that bespeak ambivalence toward the cultural effects of female literacy. As women gained increased education, along with influence and independence, artists recognized their historical progress and passed pictorial judgment on it.

The images I will discuss constitute interpretations in a double sense. As elucidated by Steven Mailloux, they are first of all translations, in this case, renderings of life in the language of the visual arts.[4] While communicating lived experience to the viewer, such representations also define its meaning in a cultural context. As both translation and explanation, they construct reality in a way that is always politically charged. The mental and temporal aspects of reading make it an activity particularly amenable to interpretive manipulation by visual artists. Unable to depict literally a subjective process of engagement with specific words, painters have used books (or their equivalents) as objective signifiers of status, achievement, and morality.

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[3] On *The Reverend Richard Mather*, see Wayne Craven, *Colonial American Portraiture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 66–67, 87; and *Witness to America's Past*, 48–49.

[4] Steven Mailloux, 'Interpretation,' in *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, eds. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 121–34.

In a recent survey of scholarship on readers and reading in America, David D. Hall contrasts the work of social historians, who seek to reconstruct how books were consumed by groups of readers, with that of literary critics, who focus on authorial production and problems of interpretation.[5] Hall identifies six categories of investigation, of which the third, 'reading as "represented" in texts,' most closely describes my own methodological approach. Like my colleagues in literature, I am interested in detecting and decoding patterns in representations of women as readers without mistaking art for life. While my analysis of images is inspired by theory, it is conducted with an eye toward history; in my view, works of art possess historical value not as documents of fact but as windows on ideology. Regardless of whether paintings accurately describe female reading practice, they are reliable indicators of ideas surrounding, and sometimes controlling, this activity. Hall makes the point that

> in any given period of time, readers had available more than one representation or ideology of reading, texts, and writing; and the proper history of reading should thus be arranged around the multiple possibilities and perhaps the conflicts that existed within a particular frame of time rather than exclusively on the transition from one mode to another.[6]

The interpretations discussed below provide material for such a 'proper' history.

Although scholars of American history and literature have contributed extensively to our knowledge of women as readers, the visual arts remain a largely untapped source of information on this theme. To initiate such an investigation, I will identify eight pictorial types—conjugal, venerable, material, cerebral, interrupted, isolated, cultivated, and worldly—that exemplify cultural as well as individual points of view. Each of these types is a visual formula used by more than one artist in a given historical period. Throughout this paper, analysis of specific works will be limited for the purpose of establishing general categories of representation.

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[5] David D. Hall, 'Readers and Reading in America: Historical and Critical Perspectives,' *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 103 (1994): 337–57.

[6] Hall, 'Readers and Reading,' 355–56.

Typing, as an iconographic practice, seeks to differentiate one group of people from another. A type constitutes a composite of general characteristics that may be physical or behavioral.[7] These imputed features reflect opinions, feelings, and interests of the viewer more than the true nature of the viewed. In the case of stereotypes, repetitive patterns of oversimplification and exaggeration embody negative attitudes. Other types reify ideal visions, platonic constructions that exceed human capability (and/or desire). When imposed on real people, ideal types, like stereotypes, disempower through suppression of distinction. They deny the individual in portraiture and the exceptional in genre painting.

For the sake of coherence and manageability, this study of types has certain parameters. It deals almost exclusively with paintings of women as readers produced by and for a middle- to upper-class white establishment. The artists, with two exceptions, are male, and all have roots in New England where many of the 'firsts' in female educational history occurred. Preference has been given to images that appear naturalistic, which makes recognition of their ideological content particularly critical.

COLONIAL PORTRAITURE: CONJUGAL AND VENERABLE

To understand visual interpretations of women as readers, we must consider the steps by which American females moved toward liberal, and ultimately liberating, education up to World War I.[8] During the colonial period in New England, young girls were taught to read in order to meet the demands of Protestant religion.

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[7] For a discussion of this practice in early photography, see Allan Sekula, 'The Body and the Archive,' *October* 39 (1986): 3–64.

[8] On women's educational history, see Barbara Miller Solomon's classic study, *In the Company of Educated Women: A History of Women and Higher Education in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985). See also Robert L. Church and Michael W. Sedlak, *Education in the United States: An Interpretive History* (New York: The Free Press of Macmillan Publishing Company, 1976); and Joel Spring, *The American School, 1642–1985* (New York: Longman, 1986).

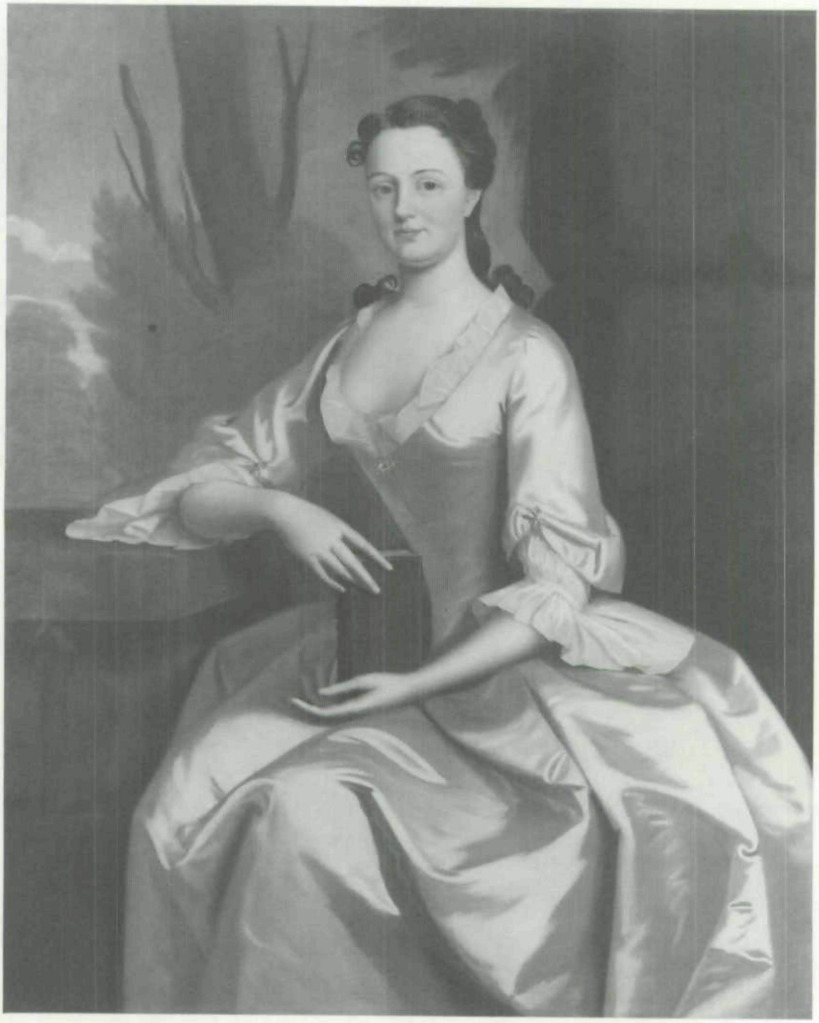

Fig. 3. Robert Feke, *Portrait of Mrs. William Bowdoin (Phebe Murdock)*, 1748. Oil on canvas. Bowdoin College Museum of Art, Brunswick, Maine. Bequest of Mrs. Sarah Bowdoin Dearborn.

Much of this instruction took place in dame schools, which were run by neighborhood women in their homes. Here children under the age of seven learned basic literary and mathematical skills along with moral lessons.[9] While boys might go on to grammar schools, education for girls typically ceased after this point. Excluded as adults from secular affairs, they were assigned responsibility for teaching in the home and for their personal salvation.[10]

Given the limits of female education in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, colonial artists used books for symbolic ends. Borrowing from British mezzotints, they created portraits of women as readers in which gender plays a defining role. The conjugal type, exemplified by Robert Feke's 1748 painting of Mrs. William Bowdoin (née Phebe Murdock, fig. 3), sets wives in complementary relationship to their husbands.[11] Based on Simon's 1705–10 engraving of Anne Oldfield as portrayed by Richardson, this paean to youthful beauty mirrors the British actress's mannered grace.[12] When the portrait of Phebe Bowdoin is paired with Feke's companion painting of her husband, William (Bowdoin College Museum of Art), her book connotes female contemplation as opposed to male action suggested by his walking stick. While the woman's literacy is implied, Feke gives no indication of actual engagement with the volume she displays.

John Singleton Copley, too, used books to signify passivity in pendant pictures of married couples.[13] His portrait of Mrs. Moses

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[9] Spring, *The American School*, 4.

[10] Solomon, *In the Company of Educated Women*, 1–13.

[11] On *Mrs. William Bowdoin*, see Linda J. Docherty, 'Preserving Our Ancestors: The Bowdoin Family Portrait Collection,' in *The Legacy of James Bowdoin III* (Brunswick, Me.: Bowdoin College Museum of Art, 1994), 63; and Marvin Sadik, *Colonial and Federal Portraits at Bowdoin College* (Brunswick, Me.: Bowdoin College Museum of Art, 1966), 55.

[12] Waldron Phoenix Belknap, Jr., *American Colonial Painting: Materials for a History* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1959), 292. Sadik notes that the reversal of Anne Oldfield's pose seems peculiar since it makes Mr. and Mrs. William Bowdoin face the same direction. Sadik, *Colonial and Federal Portraits at Bowdoin College*, 55. Feke may have borrowed selectively from several mezzotints. On this practice, see Trevor J. Fairbrother, 'John Singleton Copley's Use of British Mezzotints for His American Portraits: A Reappraisal Based on New Discoveries,' *Arts* 55 (March 1981): 122–30.

[13] In the 1750s Copley painted two sets of companion portraits, *Mrs. and Mrs. Thomas Marshall* (née Lucy Allen, private collection) and *Mr. and Mrs. James Otis* (née Mary

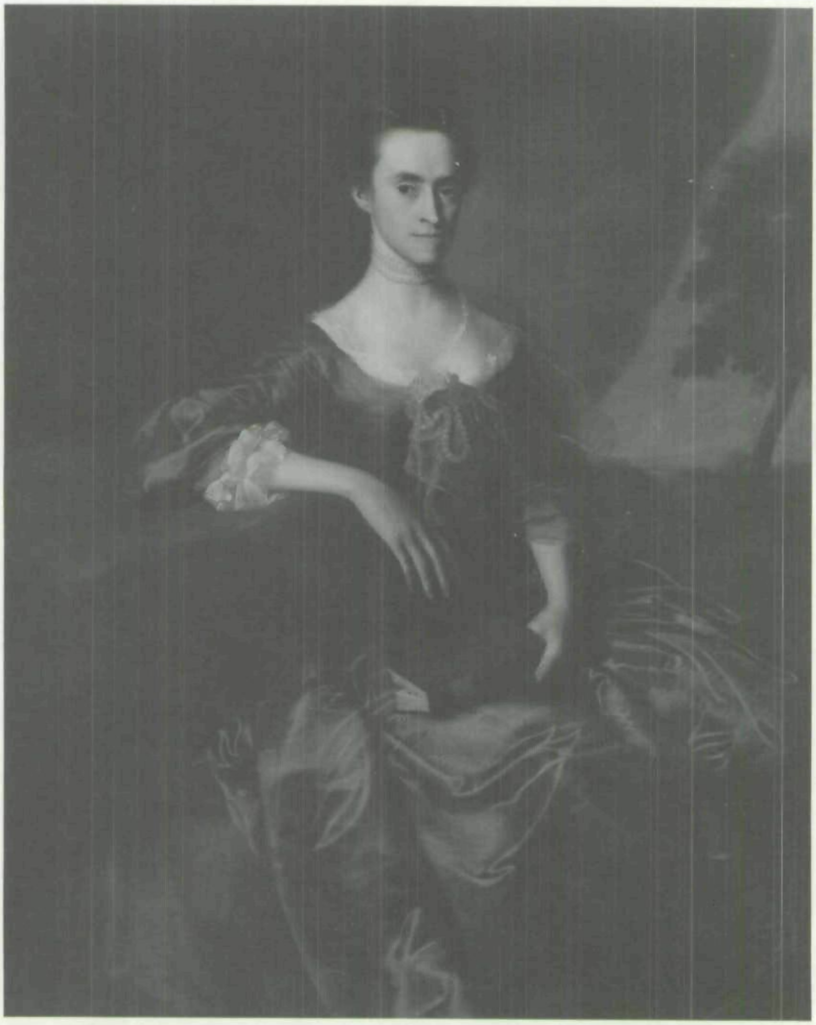

Fig. 4. John Singleton Copley, *Portrait of Sarah Prince Gill*, c. 1764. Oil on canvas. Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design. Jesse Metcalf Fund. Photography by Del Bogart.

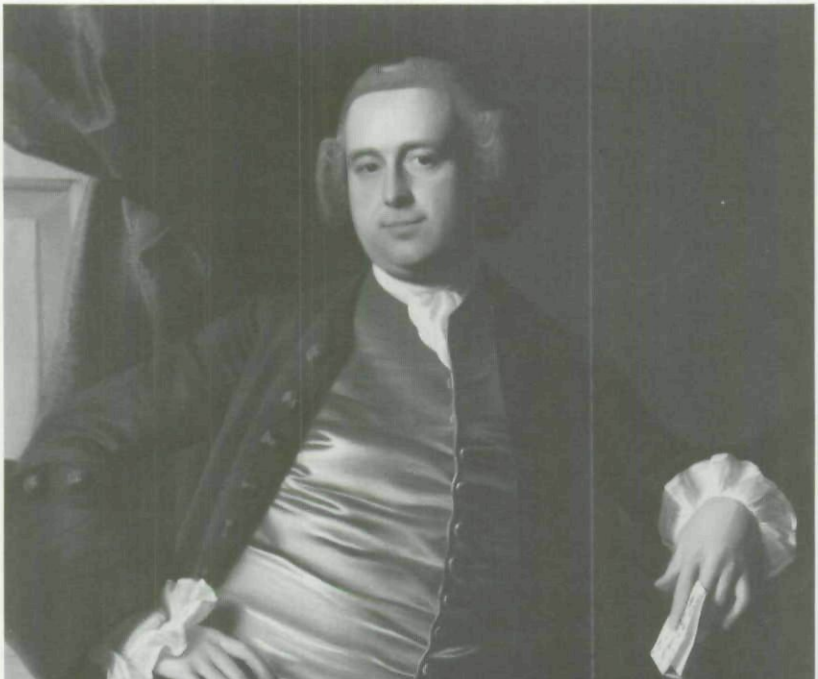

Fig. 5. John Singleton Copley, *Portrait of Governor Moses Gill*, 1764. Oil on canvas. Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design. Jesse Metcalf Fund. Photography by Del Bogart.

Gill (née Sarah Prince, fig. 4), painted in 1764, shows a conjugal reader seated with one arm resting on a rocky outcrop in a generalized landscape setting.[14] Compositionally akin to Mrs. William Bowdoin, Copley's more innovative work alters the arrangement of the hands. The sitter's left thumb is inserted in the volume, creating a sense of interrupted action. Copley allows the woman access to the book, yet it remains a comparative mark of female limitation. While Sarah Gill may reflect inwardly on her reading, her merchant husband, Moses, standing self-assuredly in the companion portrait (fig. 5), holds a letter that bespeaks his contact with the outside world.[15]

The relative confinement of the conjugal reader coincides with a bodily exposure that distinguishes her from an older, venerable type. In Joseph Badger's portrait of Mrs. John Edwards (née Abigail Fowle, fig. 6) of c. 1750–60, for example, the nubile physicality of youth has given way to sober spirituality.[16] Although painted at the height of colonial prosperity and featuring a sitter who was the widow of two wealthy husbands, this image conveys an impression of Puritan austerity. Edwards appears in a drab green costume ornamented simply by a ribbon and a single strand of pearls. Gazing directly at the viewer, she points to a small red prayer book, a volume befitting both her gender and advanced age. In his interpretation of an elderly female subject, the self-taught Badger (like the Pollard limner) harked back to an earlier male portrait, Vanderbank's painting of Sir Isaac Newton, known in the colonies through Faber's 1726 engraving.[17] Appropriating

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Alleyne, Wichita Art Museum), in which both male and female subjects appear with books. In each case, the husband's book is open, signifiying active engagement with the text, while the wife's is closed, placing her in an attitude of passive listening.

[14] On *Mrs. Moses Gill (Sarah Prince)*, see Jules David Prown, *John Singleton Copley* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art and Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966), 1:38–39; and Carrie Rebora, Paul Staiti, et al., *John Singleton Copley in America*, exh. cat. (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1995), 202. Sarah Gill was the daughter of a Congregationalist minister, which may help to explain the choice of book as attribute.

[15] On *Moses Gill*, see *Copley in America*, 200–3.

[16] On *Mrs. John Edwards*, see Carol Troyen, *The Boston Tradition: American Paintings from the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston* (Boston: American Federation of Arts, 1980), 54.

[17] See Belknap, *American Colonial Painting*, 290.

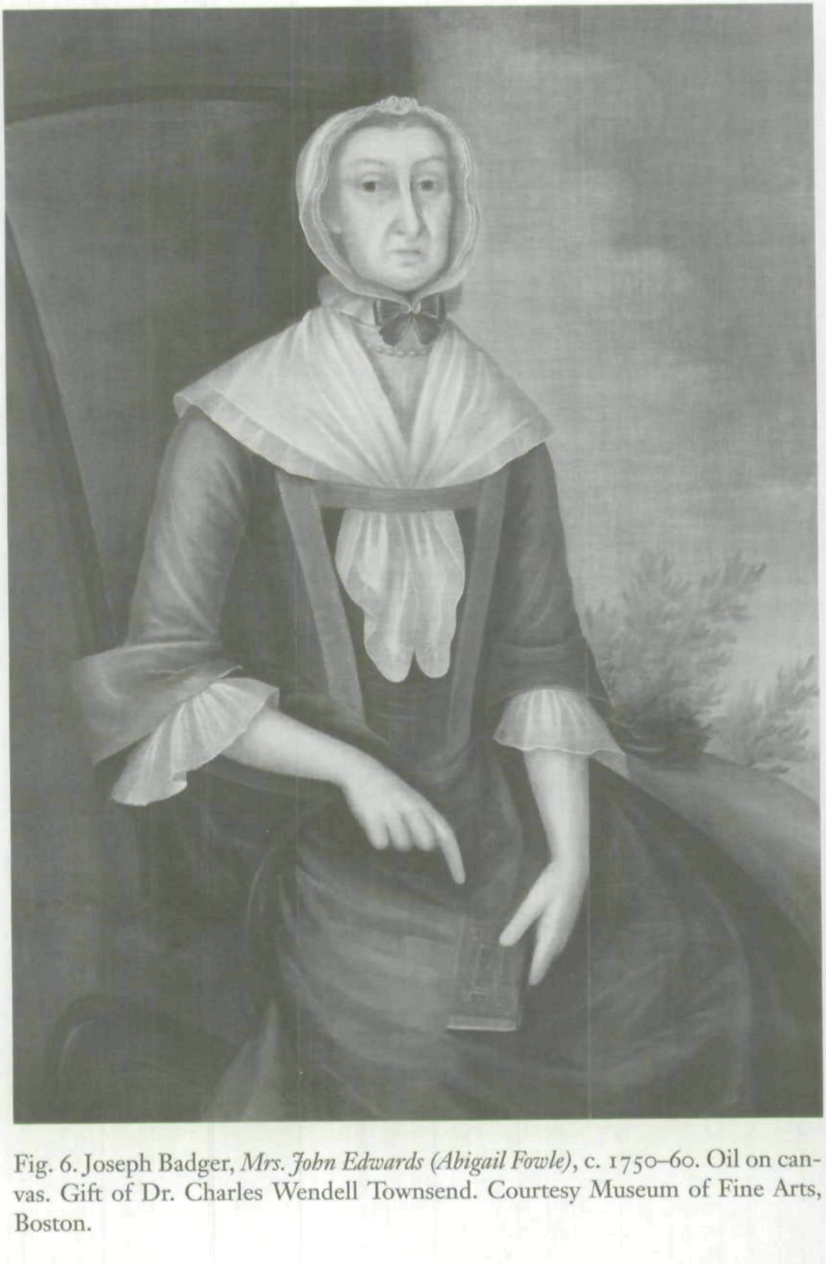

Fig. 6. Joseph Badger, *Mrs. John Edwards (Abigail Fowle)*, c. 1750–60. Oil on canvas. Gift of Dr. Charles Wendell Townsend. Courtesy Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

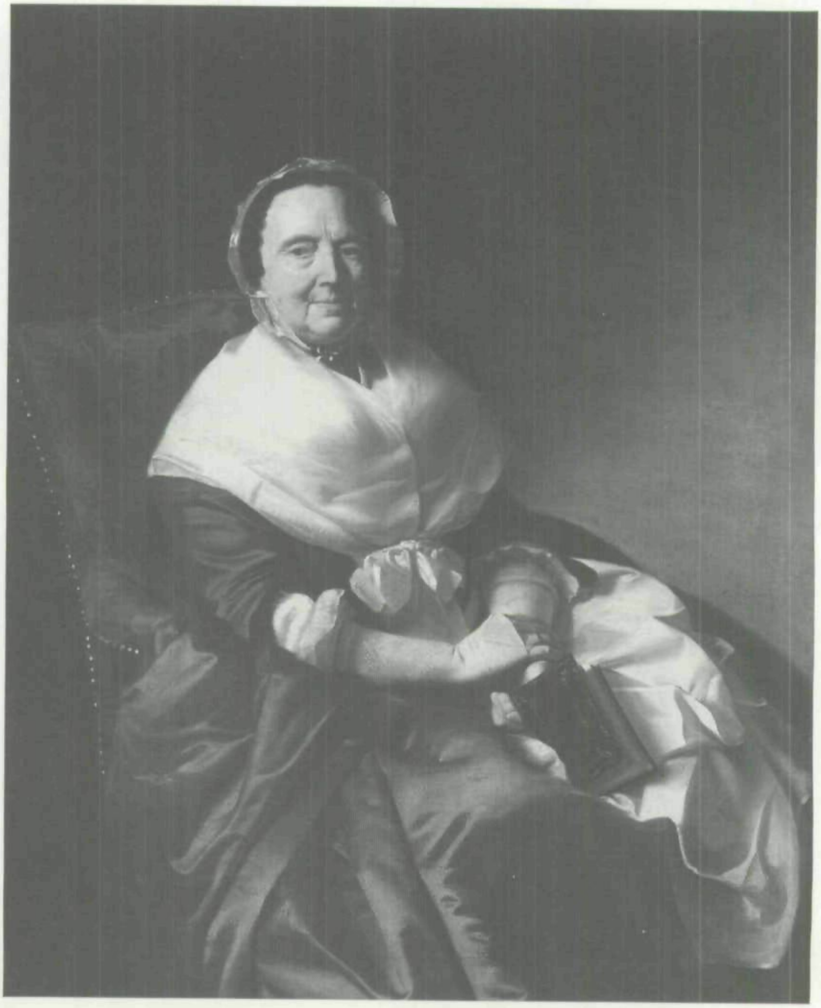

Fig. 7. John Singleton Copley, *Mrs. Sylvanus Bourne (Mercy Gorham)*, 1766. Oil on canvas. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Morris K. Jesup Fund, 1924.

the respectability if not the intellectuality of this model, the woman as reader gains legitimacy with the loss of sexuality.

The venerable type also has masculine associations in the art of Copley. Between 1764 and 1771, he painted eight distinguished single portraits of older women as readers, in which the sitters and their books are rendered with a naturalism usually reserved for images of men.[18] Copley rejected Badger's didactic reference to female piety and communicated spiritual character by naturalistic means. In Mrs. Sylvanus Bourne (née Mercy Gorham, fig. 7) of 1766, the sitter's plain dark satin dress and plain white linen cap, collar, and sleeve ruffles enhance the illusion of weightiness and sobriety.[19] At a time of mounting discontent with British rule, Copley's images of venerable readers, in 'suitably old-fashioned' dress, recall Puritan injunctions against luxury.[20] They pay homage to the religious origins of New England and the elderly woman as an exemplar of morality.

Throughout the colonial period, books served a symbolic function in female portraiture. In companion paintings of young wives they signified relative passivity; in single images of older women, neo-Puritan piety. The venerable type predominated as artists favored attributes of beauty and fertility, rather than learning, for youthful subjects. However, for women past child-bearing (particularly widows), books were emblematic of spiritual values from an earlier time. The book also honored advanced age, yet venerability was achieved at the cost of femininity. The use of male portrait models for representations of elderly women as readers demonstrates the ideological incompatibility of intellectuality and female sexuality.

While colonial painters collapsed gender boundaries in creating the venerable type, pictorial similarities between men and women were not indicative of social parity. For females before the Revolution, education remained minimal and informal; cultural values of piety, modesty, frugality, and fertility overpowered longing for intellectual improvement. Some women lamented their limitations; in 1776 Abigail Adams confessed in a letter to her husband John, 'With regard to the Education of my own children, I find myself soon out of my depth, and destitute and deficient in every part.' Adams went on to speculate, 'If much depends as is allowed upon the early Education of youth and the first principles which are instilld [*sic*] take the deepest root, great benefits must arise from literary accomplishments of women.'[21] Although she never imagined herself outside the realm of home and family, the future first lady posited a connection between politics and domesticity.

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[18] This list includes *Mrs. John Powell* (Cleveland Museum of Art); *Mrs. Joseph Calif* (private collection); *Mrs. Samuel Hill* (private collection); *Mrs. Sylvanus Bourne* (Metropolitan Museum of Art); *Mrs. Nathaniel Ellery* (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston); *Mrs. Ebenezer Austin* (private collection); *Mrs. James Russell* (North Carolina Museum of Art); and *Mrs. Michael Gill* (The Tate Gallery, London).

[19] See Aileen Ribeiro, '"The Whole Art of Dress": Costume in the Work of John Singleton Copley,' in *Copley in America*, 108.

[20] Paul Staiti interprets a self-conscious 'denial of ostentation' on the part of certain wealthy sitters in the 1760s as a form of political opposition. See Paul Staiti, 'Character and Class,' in *Copley in America*, 68–73.

At the close of the Revolution, the nature of this relationship received serious consideration in public discourse. Men (like John Adams), who believed the success of the new nation would depend upon its virtue, claimed that women had a civic role to play in overseeing their husbands' conduct and in the bearing and rearing of 'liberty-loving sons.' The concept of Republican motherhood granted females political influence without allowing them direct participation.[22] Women, however, seized upon concerns about American citizenship to justify their desire for better education.

EARLY NINETEENTH-CENTURY PORTRAITURE: MATERIAL AND CEREBRAL

In the decades following the American Revolution women began to have educational opportunities equal to those of men. Instrumental in this early progress was the public school, which aimed to create an informed and virtuous citizenry. The Massachusetts Education Act of 1789 called for elementary schools in all towns and grammar schools in communities of more than two hundred families. This act permitted girls to go to school with boys and study the same subjects. More radical was its stipulation that public funds should pay for women's education.[23]

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[21] Abigail Adams to John Adams, August 14, 1776. L. H. Butterfield et al., eds., *Adams Family Correspondence* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1963), 1:94. Quoted in Solomon, *In the Company of Educated Women*, 1.

[22] On Republican motherhood, see Linda K. Kerber's seminal article, 'The Republican Mother: Women and the Enlightenment—An American Perspective,' *American Quarterly* 28 (Summer 1976): 187–205; and her book, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980). On the sources of this concept in Scottish philosophy, see Rosemarie Zagarri, 'Morals, Manners, and the Republican Mother,' *American Quarterly* 44 (June 1992): 192–215. Zagarri makes the case that Republican motherhood was rooted in a transatlantic reconceptualization of women's social role that began before the American Revolution.

The rise in female literacy, sanctioned by the belief that mothers were responsible for their children's moral character, coincided with new developments in the history of the book. Expanded production coupled with the growth of secular literature made books more accessible and amenable to individual taste.[24] Research suggests that men and women partook equally of the new variety of printed material and enjoyed many of the same texts. For an ambitious middle class, reading also provided practical information that enhanced social mobility.[25]

In the colonial period, portraits, like books, belonged almost exclusively to members of the urban aristocracy, but by the early nineteenth century they were increasingly produced as consumer goods. Throughout rural New England so-called 'plain painters' satisfied the desire of a rising bourgeoisie to flaunt its new prosperity.[26] These artists imitated the forms of academic easel painting with limited knowledge of or skill in its techniques. In a similar fashion, their patrons aspired to elite status on the basis of material wealth alone.

As represented in companion portraits by plain painters, women as readers display the secular values of their social class.[27]

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[23] Spring, *The American School*, 57.

[24] See William Gilmore, *Reading Becomes a Necessity of Life: Material and Cultural Life in Rural New England, 1780–1835* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1989).

[25] See Richard D. Brown, *Knowledge Is Power: The Diffusion of Information in Early America, 1700–1865* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

[26] On the use of 'plain' to refer to what has traditionally been called 'folk' art, see John Michael Vlach, *Plain Painters: Making Sense of American Folk Art* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1988), xv–xvi.

[27] Companion portraits account for one third to one half of New England portraits, which indicates the social importance of the conjugal bond. See *Meet Your Neighbors: New England Portraits, Painters, and Society, 1790–1850*, exh. cat. (Sturbridge, Mass.: Old Sturbridge Village, 1992), 17.

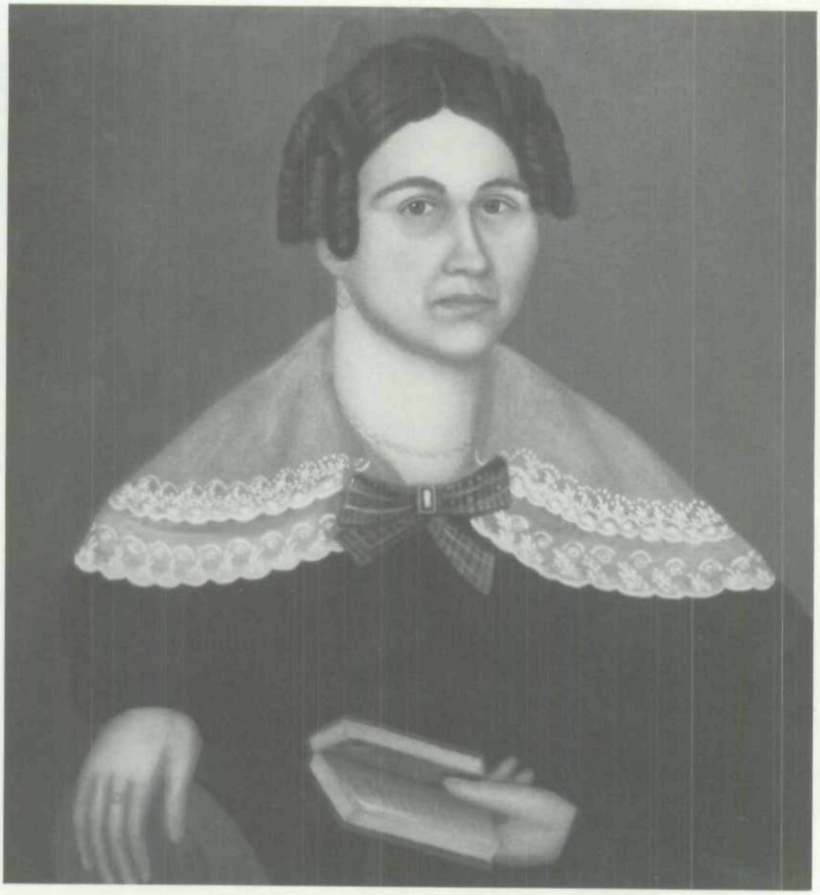

Fig. 8. Horace Bundy, *Mary B. Goddard*, 1837. Oil on canvas. Courtesy Heritage Plantation of Sandwich, Cape Cod, Massachusetts. Photography by Michelle Bosch.

The book became a favored female attribute in a new, material type, where it figured in an array of worldly goods. Horace Bundy's 1837 painting of Mary B. Goddard (fig. 8) emulates, with variation, Copley's *Mrs. Moses Gill*. In both images the suggestion of the female sitter's literacy is mitigated by attention lavished on jewelry and dress. While Copley conveys an illusion of pearls and satin, however, Bundy provides an inventory of possessions. Mary

Goddard wears a hair comb, gold bead necklace, pendant earbobs, brooch, and ring. The patterns of her embroidered shawl and printed bow are described in meticulous detail. Bundy further removes the woman from the book as text by its position in her hand. Deploying the thumb-in gesture, he opens the pages outward, toward the viewer, to emphasize the writing rather than the reading.[28]

Like the conjugal type of the colonial period, material readers appear passive in comparison to their husbands. Middle-class couples acquired their wealth less from inherited capital than from artisanal labor, an activity male sitters often proudly demonstrate. Mary Goddard's husband Nathan holds a pocket watch in one hand and a tool in the other in the companion portrait (fig. 9); we see him in the process of making a repair. Whereas Copley's *Moses Gill* equates mercantile success with mental occupation (reading a letter), Bundy's image of a New Hampshire watchmaker celebrates manual enterprise. Male activity becomes more physical in portraits of the rural bourgeoisie; concurrently, female passivity ceases to be visually associated with sexuality. High necklines and long sleeves deemphasize fertility in the material type of reader and, with it, lineage as a primary determinant of social class.

This repression of female sexuality recalls colonial portraits of venerable readers, which also served as models for the material type. Abigail Edwards's furrowed countenance and Mercy Bourne's hand-on-wrist pose recur with variation in Erastus Salisbury Field's 1836 portrait of Bethiah Smith Bassett (fig. 10).[29] Both Copley and Field use consumer goods to define the status of older female sitters. But while the former surrounds the woman reader with luxury objects, the latter subsumes her in surface ornament.

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[28] This means of detaching the woman from the text has origins in Renaissance painting. See John Pope-Hennessy, *The Portrait in the Renaissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 235. In Bundy's portrait of Mary Goddard's son John (Old Sturbridge Village), the male child holds a book with pages opened toward him.

[29] On the portraits of Bethiah Smith Bassett and her husband Nathaniel, see *Meet Your Neighbors*, 76–77.

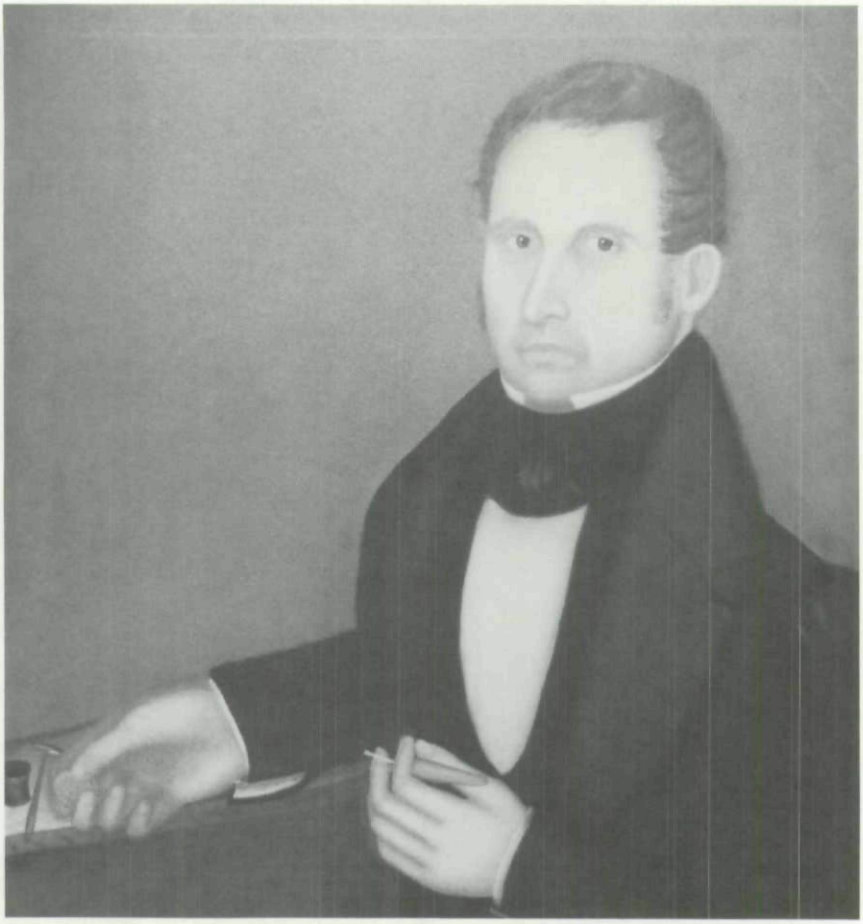

Fig. 9. Horace Bundy, *Nathan W. Goddard*, 1837. Oil on canvas. Courtesy Heritage Plantation of Sandwich, Cape Cod, Massachusetts. Photography by Michelle Bosch.

Ruffled cap and brocade shawl disrupt the visual connection between Bethiah Bassett and the book she holds; only the volume's mottled cover serves primarily to punctuate the plainness of her dress. The neo-Puritan austerity that distinguishes colonial portraits of venerable subjects has been compromised by earthly values.

If the material type represents women's educational advance-

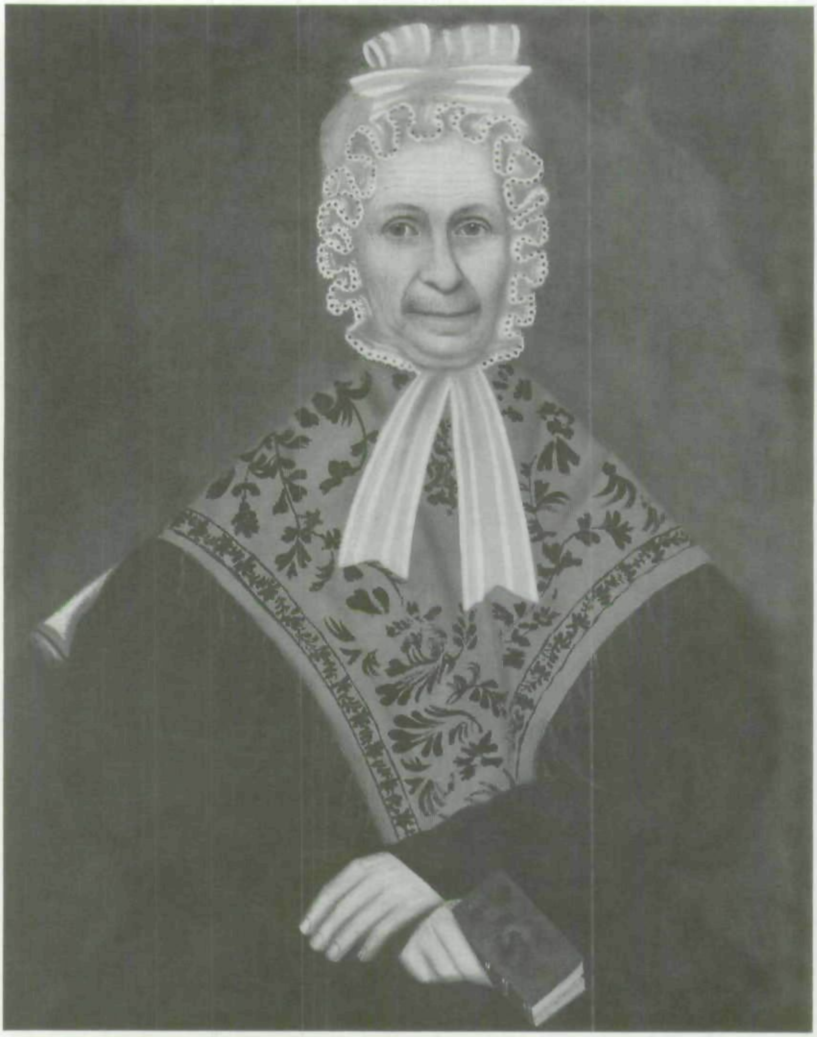

Fig. 10. Erastus Salisbury Field, *Bethiah Smith Bassett*, c. 1836. Oil on cloth. Smith College Museum of Art, Northampton, Massachusetts.

ment as a commodity, it documents racial progress in a more celebratory way. *Nancy Lawson* (fig. 11), painted by William Matthew Prior in 1843, bears witness to African-American achievement in New England before the Civil War.[30] Prior spared no detail of setting or costume in this portrait of a black woman. His Boston sitter poses proudly before a red velvet curtain; to the right a landscape with figures unfolds behind a mullioned window. Along with gold, lace, and embroidery, the clothing merchant's wife sports decorative buttons and a colorful ribbon on her cap. The book Lawson holds points toward an inscription that couples the sitter's and the artist's names. Prior's appropriation of a white type for an African-American subject suggests antiracist sentiments in an era when few blacks had their portraits made.

African-American women of Lawson's generation also resisted boundaries imposed upon their race. Committed to teaching as a means of racial betterment, academy graduates became increasingly involved in antislavery and abolitionist societies. The radical activities of black females met with considerable opposition from both white women who shared their larger goals and black women who felt they were exceeding their rightful place.[31] Prior's portrait of Nancy Lawson (whose educational history remains unknown) makes no reference to these struggles. It proclaims economic prosperity and the emergence of an African-American middle class. While educated females in the black community fought sexism along with racism, the white male artist focused on the economic success of men. The material type, irrespective of both age and race, makes women as readers vehicles for display.

In most antebellum portraits decorative treatment precludes intellectual characterization of women, and the rare exceptions prove this rule. Chester Harding's painting of Hannah Adams (fig. 12) represents an individual whose literary accomplishment

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30. On *Mrs. Nancy Lawson* and the companion portrait, *William Lawson*, see *Meet Your Neighbors*, 110.

31. See Solomon, *In the Company of Educated Women*, 40–41.

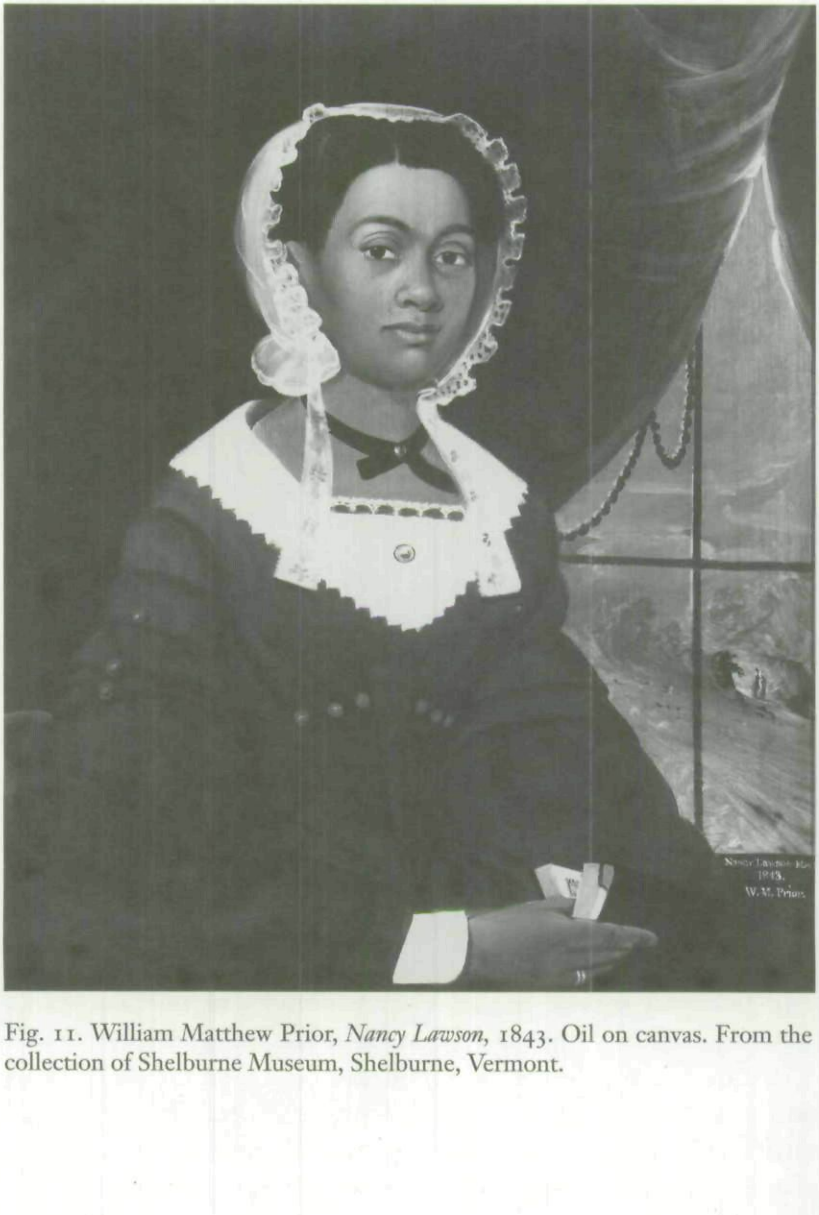
Nancy Lawson
1843.
W. M. Prior.

Fig. 11. William Matthew Prior, *Nancy Lawson*, 1843. Oil on canvas. From the collection of Shelburne Museum, Shelburne, Vermont.

was recognized in her own time.[32] Arguably the first professional female writer in America, Adams began publishing books on religious subjects in 1784 at the age of twenty-nine. In 1827, the year she sat for Harding, she was allowed full access to the Boston Athenæum library, a privilege never before granted to a woman. Harding represents the elderly Adams as a cerebral reader; we see her contemplating the contents of an open book. The monumental Bible by her elbow attests to her abiding interest in religion, her reflective expression to the power of her mind.

Portraits of the cerebral type communicate a sense of mental purpose by establishing a close physical connection between the sitter and the book. Approximately the same age as Bethiah Bassett, Hannah Adams, as a reader, exemplifies a different character. In both paintings, the septuagenarian's upper body forms an equilateral triangle with book and hands at the midpoint of the base. Both women wear caps, shawls, and long-sleeved dresses and avert their eyes from the viewer's gaze. Bassett's sidelong glance may imply a certain modesty, but it also serves to focus attention on the decorative richness of her costume.[33] In Adams's portrait, by contrast, ornamental details of chair and bindings remain confined to the periphery. The volume she holds lies fully open on the table, her left index finger marking the line that triggered her reflection. While Bassett displays the book as object, Adams engages it as a text.[34]

Harding's painting of Hannah Adams established a precedent for honoring educated women, although few antebellum artists had occasion to pursue his lead. One of these exceptions was

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[32] For biographical information on Hannah Adams and a discussion of Harding's portrait, see Leah Lipton, *A Truthful Likeness: Chester Harding and His Portraits*, exh. cat. (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1985), 92–93. See also Hannah Adams, *A Memoir of Miss Hannah Adams, Written by Herself with Additional Notes by a Friend* (Boston: Gray & Brown, 1832).

[33] In the companion portrait Nathaniel Bassett looks directly at the viewer.

[34] For a discussion of ways in which antebellum readers used mass-produced books to strengthen social and familial bonds, see Ronald J. Zboray and Mary Saracino Zboray, 'Books, Reading, and the World of Goods in Antebellum New England,' *American Quarterly* 48 (December 1996): 587–622.

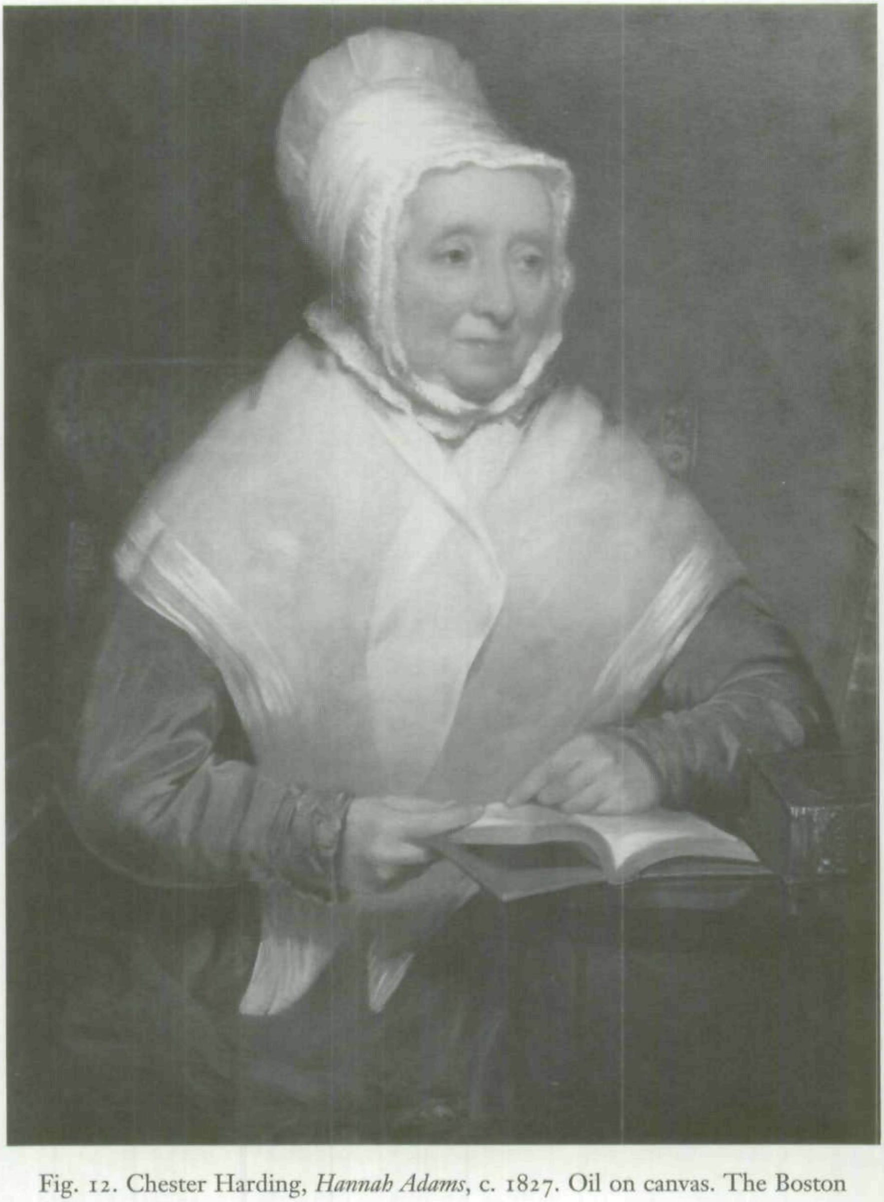

Fig. 12. Chester Harding, *Hannah Adams*, c. 1827. Oil on canvas. The Boston Athenæum.

Francis Alexander, whose 1828 copy of Harding's portrait of Hannah Adams (made for the American Antiquarian Society) no doubt informed his subsequent interpretation of the cerebral type. Alexander's subject was Prudence Crandall, a pioneering educator of African-American girls.[35] When the New England Anti-Slavery Society commissioned Crandall's portrait in April 1834, the school she had founded in Canterbury, Connecticut, was besieged by racist violence that five months later would force its closing. Though she appears composed in Alexander's painting (fig. 13), her vise-like hold on a small tooled-leather volume (possibly a prayerbook) bespeaks a tense determination.

In this direct, unadorned representation, Alexander highlights Crandall's cerebral character by formal means. A transparent shawl, that provides a modest covering for Crandall's neckline, also creates a nexus between her head and hands. Painterly handling of shawl and background throw these more sharply detailed areas of the portrait into prominence. Similarly drawn, Crandall's steady gaze and firm grasp on the book imply that one depends upon the other.

As writer and as teacher, Adams and Crandall advanced the cause of female education through achievements that earned them the respect of men. When their portraits were painted, both women were unmarried; devotion to learning did not conflict, therefore, with female obligations to family and state.[36] In life, Adams and Crandall successfully defied gender restrictions, but in art, their representation coincided with recognition by male-dominated institutions. One must not infer from the relative scarcity of portraits of the cerebral type that the majority of middle-class women did not take education seriously.

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[35] For biographical information on Prudence Crandall and a discussion of Alexander's portrait, see Susan Strane, *A Whole-Souled Woman: Prudence Crandall and the Education of Black Women* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1990). On Alexander's portrait, see *Meet Your Neighbors*, 82–84; and Richard J. Powell, 'Cinque: Antislavery Portraiture and Patronage in Jacksonian America,' *American Art* 11 (1997): 49–50. I would like to thank Lynn M. Bertoia for calling my attention to the Powell article.

[36] Crandall would wed later in 1834.

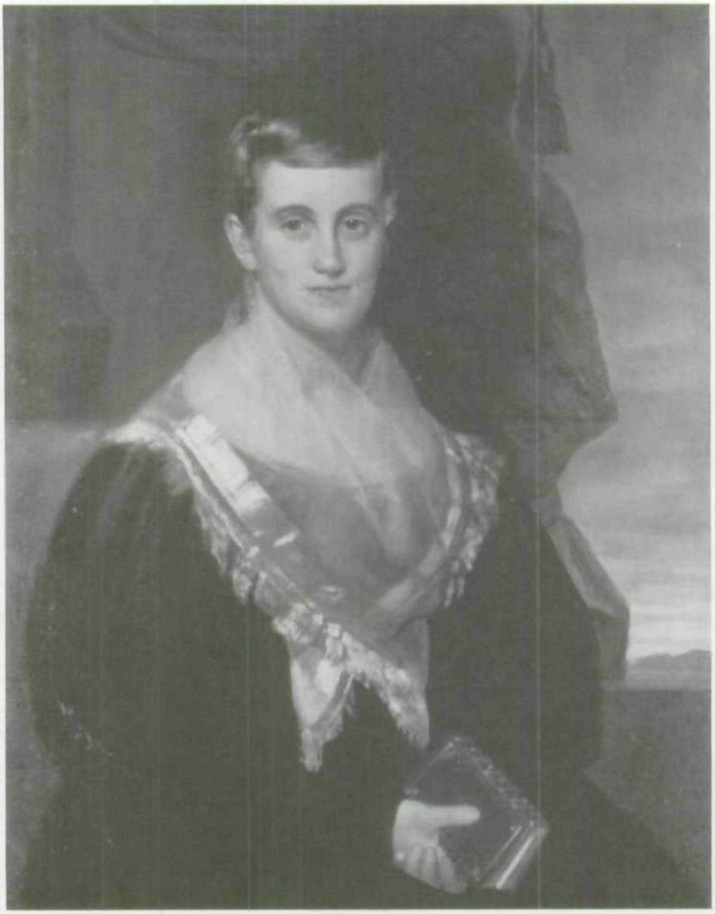

Fig. 13. Francis Alexander, *Prudence Crandall*, 1834. Oil on canvas. Courtesy Cornell University Library.

On the contrary, the proliferation of books in female portraits of the early nineteenth century bespeaks widespread pride in a newly-acquired literacy. Historian Mary Kelley has shown, moreover, that antebellum women were creative and self-conscious readers, who found models of behavior and aspiration in learned females, past and present.[37] This burgeoning intellectual ambition goes begging in the material type, who represents achievement measurable in consumer goods. Affirming the traditional connection between females and the decorative arts, such images anticipate their characterization as consumers rather than producers. Until women took education and art into their own hands, men would delimit the visual interpretation of their experience as readers.

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[37] Mary Kelley, 'Reading Women/Women Reading: The Making of Learned Women

MID-NINETEENTH-CENTURY GENRE PAINTING: INTERRUPTED AND ISOLATED

In the first half of the nineteenth century, American women played a leading role in the institutionalization of their education. Across the country, a growing number of academies and seminaries (and some colleges) gave females their first formal exposure to liberal studies. Based on a male model, the new schools offered instruction in geography, history, philosophy, and astronomy, subjects hitherto reserved for boys.[38] The most influential institutions—Emma Willard's Troy Seminary (1821), Catharine Beecher's Hartford Seminary (1828), and Mary Lyon's Mount Holyoke Seminary (1837)—were designed primarily for teacher training. As teachers, women could participate in benevolent and missionary activities of their churches and, in the case of spinsters, alleviate the financial burden they imposed upon their families.[39]

While the concept of Republican motherhood led to improvements in the quality and quantity of schools for women, educational leaders endorsed the separation of male and female spheres. As explicated by Barbara Welter, the antebellum cult of True Womanhood judged a female by her piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. 'Without them, no matter whether there was

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in Antebellum America,' *Journal of American History* 83 (September 1996), 401–24. I would like to thank Mary Kelley for this reference.

[38] Spring, *The American School*, 115.

[39] Solomon, *In the Company of Educated Women*, 14–42. During the Civil War and Reconstruction, when the number of marriageable males fell precipitously, teaching offered women both a respectable profession and a means of participating in the 'strenuous life' usually reserved for men.

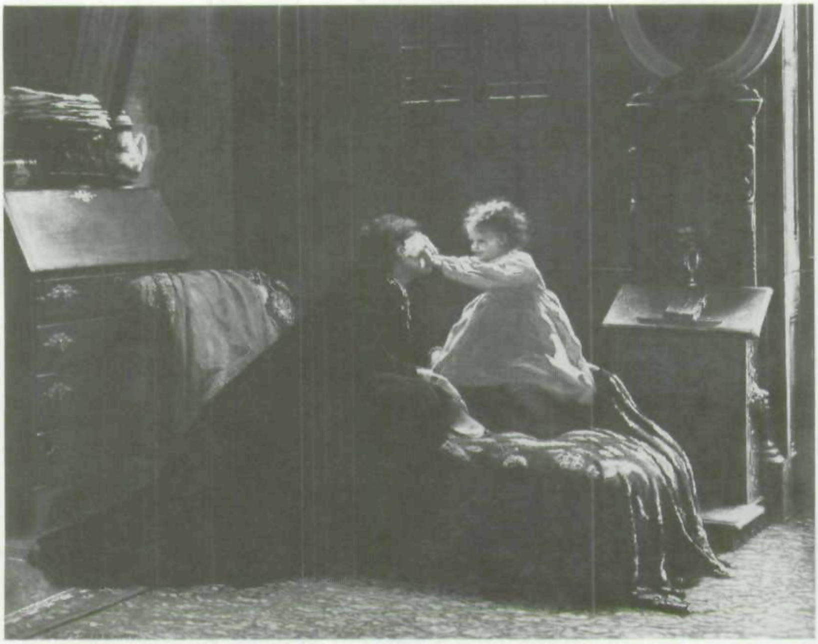

Fig. 14. Eastman Johnson, *Bo-Peep*, 1872. Oil on composition board. © Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth, Texas.

fame, achievement, or wealth, all was ashes. With them she was promised happiness and power.'[40] Rather than attempt to invade male-dominated fields of law, medicine, or divinity, domestic feminists claimed that women's work had equal value and importance. In the introduction to *The American Woman's Home*, Catharine Beecher stated that her purpose was

> to elevate both the honor and the remuneration of all the employments that sustain the many difficult and sacred duties of the family state, and thus to render each department of woman's true profession as much desired and respected as are the most honored professions of men.[41]

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[40] Barbara Welter, 'The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820–1860,' *American Quarterly* 18 (Summer 1966): 152. See also Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: 'Woman's Sphere' in New England, 1780–1835* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977).

[41] Catharine E. Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The American Woman's Home* (Watkins Glen, N.Y.: American Life Foundation, 1979), 13. *The American Woman's Home*, first published in 1869, was an expanded version of Beecher's 1841 *Treatise on Domestic Economy*.

By representing teaching as an extension of domestic responsibility, educators such as Beecher rebutted arguments that increased schooling would lure American women away from their 'proper sphere,' the home. As wives, mothers, and teachers, females were conceived as figures of charity, who naturally placed the needs of family and community before their own.

The belief that education must not distract from domesticity informed new interpretations of women as readers that distinguished types by their relationship to others. As photography usurped the middle-class market for portraiture, genre painting became a theater in which choices available to women with the power to read were weighed. In Eastman Johnson's *Bo-Peep* (fig. 14) of 1872, a doting mother responds to her playful child's demands by laying down her open book.[42] Her behavior marks her as an interrupted reader whose engagement with books is limited by social responsibility. Whereas conjugal and material types appear passive in relationship to their husbands, interrupted types with children assume an active pictorial role. Johnson's stable triangular arrangement of the figures neutralizes the disruptive content of the narrative. Marked by a cross, a Bible on the prie-dieu underscores the virtuous character of the mother's action.

Like Republican mothers, female teachers put themselves in service to the nation's youth.[43] The feminization of common-school instruction in nineteenth-century America reflected the theory of Johann Pestalozzi, a Prussian educator who linked moral development to sensory training and maternal love.[44] In *The Country School* (fig. 15) of 1871 by Winslow Homer, a Yankee schoolmarm dutifully guides a barefoot boy through his reading lesson.[45] While Johnson's mother sets down her book to serve a child, Homer's teacher picks up her pupil's text, a black-spined *McGuffey's Reader*. She focuses on the male side of the classroom, an orientation that coincides with the patriarchal values of her culture. Behind her (in a vignette that anticipates the rise of women's study clubs) three girls are left to teach each other.[46] With their heads bent over a single book, they, too, bow to the established order. Their female role model, an interrupted reader, uses her education to support American society, not for personal improvement or enjoyment.[47]

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[42] On *Bo-Peep*, see Patricia Hills, *Eastman Johnson* (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, Inc., 1972), 76; and John Wilmerding, Linda Ayres, and Earl Powell, *An American Perspective: Nineteenth-Century Art from the Collection of JoAnn and Julian Ganz, Jr.*, exh. cat. (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1981), 52.

[43] By the mid-nineteenth century, an estimated one-fifth of Massachusetts women had taught school at least once in their lives. See Catherine Clinton, *The Other Civil War: American Women in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1984), 123.

[44] Spring, *The American School*, 125–30.

In the South after the Civil War, African Americans drew no such distinction between the social and individual. Working together, young and old, male and female struggled to attain the literacy long denied them. Homer's *Sunday Morning in Virginia* (fig. 16) of 1877 captures the common purpose that characterized black education during Reconstruction.[48] Gathered informally before a humble hearth, three young African Americans receive instruction from a woman of their own race. While the white schoolmarm looks down at her pupils, the black teacher sits squarely in their midst. With their bodies pressed close to hers, she reads aloud from an open book (presumably a Bible). To the right of the closely-knit foursome, an older woman guards the learning process like a sentinel in the days of slavery. Among

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[45] On Homer's school paintings, see Nicolai Cikovsky, Jr., 'Winslow Homer's *School Time*: "A Picture Thoroughly National,"' in *Essays in Honor of Paul Mellon, Collector and Benefactor*, ed. John Wilmerding (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1986), 47–69.

[46] On women's clubs, see Karen J. Blair, *The Clubwoman as Feminist: True Womanhood Redefined, 1868–1914* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1980); Theodora Penny Martin, *The Sound of Our Own Voices: Women's Study Clubs, 1860–1910* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987); and Anne Firor Scott, *Natural Allies: Women's Associations in American History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991).

[47] Homer developed the theme of teacher self-sacrifice more explicitly in *The Noon Recess*, a wood engraving published in *Harper's Weekly* (June 28, 1873). It shows a disgruntled schoolmarm staring out the schoolhouse window while she supervises a young boy's indoor punishment.

[48] On *Sunday Morning in Virginia*, see Peter H. Wood and Karen C. C. Dalton, *Winslow Homer's Images of Blacks: The Civil War and Reconstruction Years* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1988), 87–88.

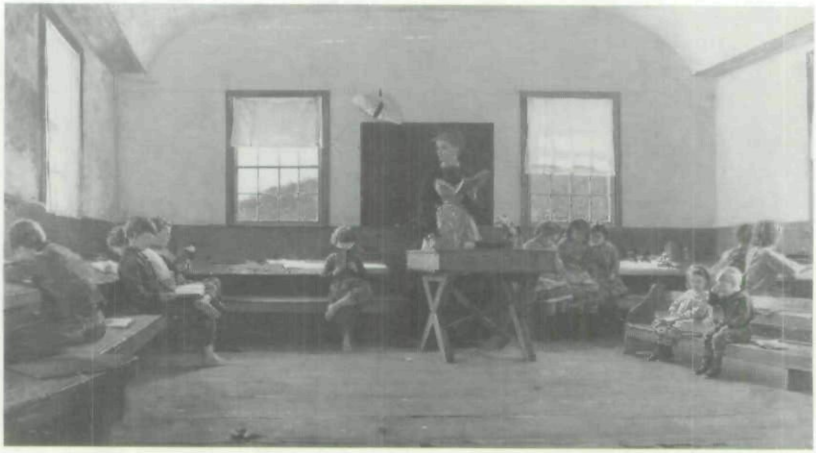

Fig. 15. Winslow Homer, *The Country School*, 1871. Oil on canvas. The St. Louis Art Museum.

newly emancipated African Americans, reading could not be interrupted.

Women, black and white, who worked to educate the freedmen gained a sense of accomplishment and independence that was gratifying personally.[49] For others in more conventional occupations, social responsibility could curtail the liberating power of literacy. In her 1868 novel *Little Women*, Louisa May Alcott described the tension that often accompanied a female reader's charitable action.[50] When the book opens, Jo—in real life, Louisa—has become companion to her crotchety yet rich Aunt March in an effort to ease the ever-strained March family finances. Although the two strong-willed women are often at odds, Jo is lured to the old lady's house by the library, a dim, dusty 'wilderness of books' which, for her, is a 'region of bliss.' Alcott writes,

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[49] On the white contribution to black education, see Jacqueline Jones, *Soldiers of Light and Love: Northern Teachers and Georgia Blacks, 1865–1873* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980).

[50] On the reception of *Little Women* to the present day, see Barbara Sicherman, 'Reading *Little Women*: The Many Lives of a Text,' in *U.S. History as Women's History: New Feminist Essays*, eds. Linda K. Kerber, Alice Kessler-Harris, and Kathryn Kish Sklar (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 245–66.

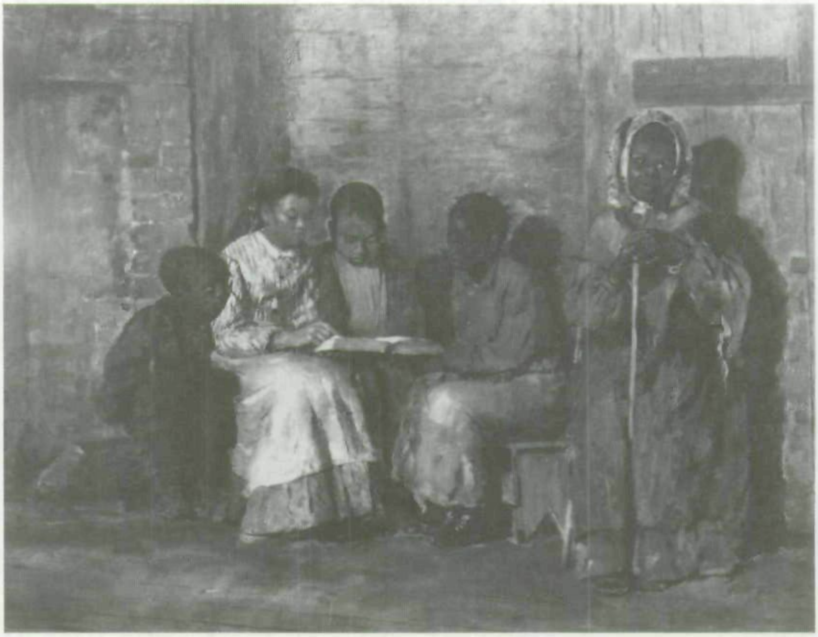

Fig. 16. Winslow Homer, *Sunday Morning in Virginia*, 1877. Oil on canvas. Cincinnati Art Museum, John J. Emery Endowment.

> The moment Aunt March took her nap, or was busy with company, Jo hurried to this quiet place, and, curling herself up in the easy chair, devoured poetry, romance, history, travels, and pictures, like a regular bookworm. But, like all happiness, it did not last long; for as sure as she had just reached the heart of the story, the sweetest verse of the song, or the most perilous adventure of her traveler, a shrill voice called 'Josy-phine! Josy-phine!' [note the full, feminine version of her name] and she had to leave her paradise to wind yarn, wash the poodle, or read Belsham's *Essays* by the hour.[51]

In her description of Jo, Alcott creates contrasting images of the educated woman at mid-century. Alone in the heavenly realm of the library, she is an isolated reader, immersed in her book, her

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[51] Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women* (New York: Bantam Books, 1983), 36. Thomas Belsham was an eighteenth-century Unitarian divine. On books in *Little Women*, see Jesse S. Crisler, 'Alcott's Reading in *Little Women*: Shaping the Autobiographical Self,' *Sources for American Literary Study* 20 (1994), 27–36.

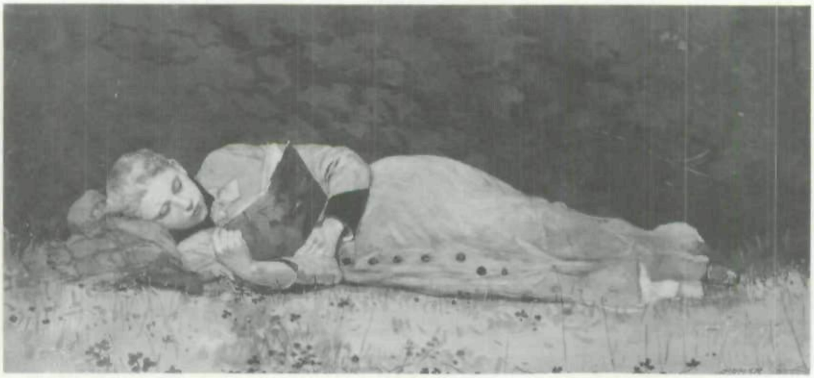

Fig. 17. Winslow Homer, *The New Novel*, 1877. Watercolor. Museum of Fine Arts, Springfield, Mass., Horace J. Wright Collection.

imagination free to roam. At Aunt March's call, however, she becomes an interrupted reader, who abandons literary passions for domestic obligations. For Alcott's heroine, the ability to read is both an aid to duty and a source of pleasure. While the interrupted reader serves society, the isolated reader is separated from it.

Reading in isolation was interpreted by male artists as a form of luxury. In *The New Novel* (fig. 17), a Winslow Homer watercolor of 1877, a young woman lies on the grass engrossed in the latest literary fiction.[52] Compared to the country schoolmarm, whose standing pose anchors a group of figures, this prostrate female subject with a book is entirely at rest and self-contained. The isolated reader's mental impenetrability draws attention to her physical appearance. Recumbent in an orange dress, red stocking rhyming with red lips, she is, by Victorian standards, visually available and alluring.[53] Ease of body serves here as the outward sign of mental freedom. The shaded outdoor backdrop, which silhouettes a curvaceous figure, separates the novel-reader from any recognizable reality.

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[52] On *The New Novel*, see Helen A. Cooper, *Winslow Homer Watercolors*, exh. cat. (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 40.

[53] Homer may have had a personal attraction to the model for *The New Novel*. See Henry Adams, 'Winslow Homer's Mystery Woman,' *Art and Antiques* (1984), 38–45.

Novels, identifiable in art by their portable size and/or soft covers (they were often serialized in magazines), captured the imagination of American women in the nineteenth century and sparked concern among cultural critics of both sexes.[54] Unlike history, which offered object lessons in Republican values, these sentimental and often sensational literary productions transported readers to the realm of fantasy.[55] Domestic arbiter Catharine Beecher viewed novels with considerable ambivalence. As pure amusements, she believed, they offered useful stimulation for 'torpid and phlegmatic' minds but threatened to injure 'quick and active imaginations.' While granting that fictitious narratives (notably scriptural parables and allegories) could also be instructive, Beecher called for banishment of all texts that promulgated 'false views of life and duty.'[56] Young women who exchanged morally edifying works for fiction were particularly vulnerable to being 'ruined by a book.'[57]

The fear of female ruination, intimated in Homer's watercolor, had abated by the 1890s, when novels came to be associated with summer and the emergence of a leisure class. Childe Hassam's *Summer Sunlight* (fig. 18), painted in 1892, shows an isolated reader on the rocky cliffs of one of the Isles of Shoals. Broken brushwork and prismatic color weave figure, book, and landscape into shimmering plein-air unity; in this unbounded setting, the woman and her imagination are implicitly at liberty.[58] Hassam

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[54] On novels and novel-reading, see Cathy N. Davidson, *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); and Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Doubleday, 1988).

[55] On the advocacy of history, see Mary Kelley, 'Designing a Past for the Present: Women Writing Women's History in Nineteenth-Century America,' *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 106 (1996): 320–21.

[56] Beecher, *American Woman's Home*, 292–93. Beecher called for male oversight of novels but cautioned editors, clergymen, and teachers not to corrupt themselves in an effort to protect others.

[57] Welter, 'Cult of True Womanhood,' 166.

[58] For those familiar with the Isles, the setting of *Summer Sunlight* would have recalled 'Miss Underhill's Chair' on Star Island, named for a New Hampshire schoolteacher who had been swept away by a tidal wave in 1848. See David Park Curry, *Childe Hassam: An Island Garden Revisited*, exh. cat. (Denver: Denver Art Museum and New York: W. W. Norton, 1990), 151-52.

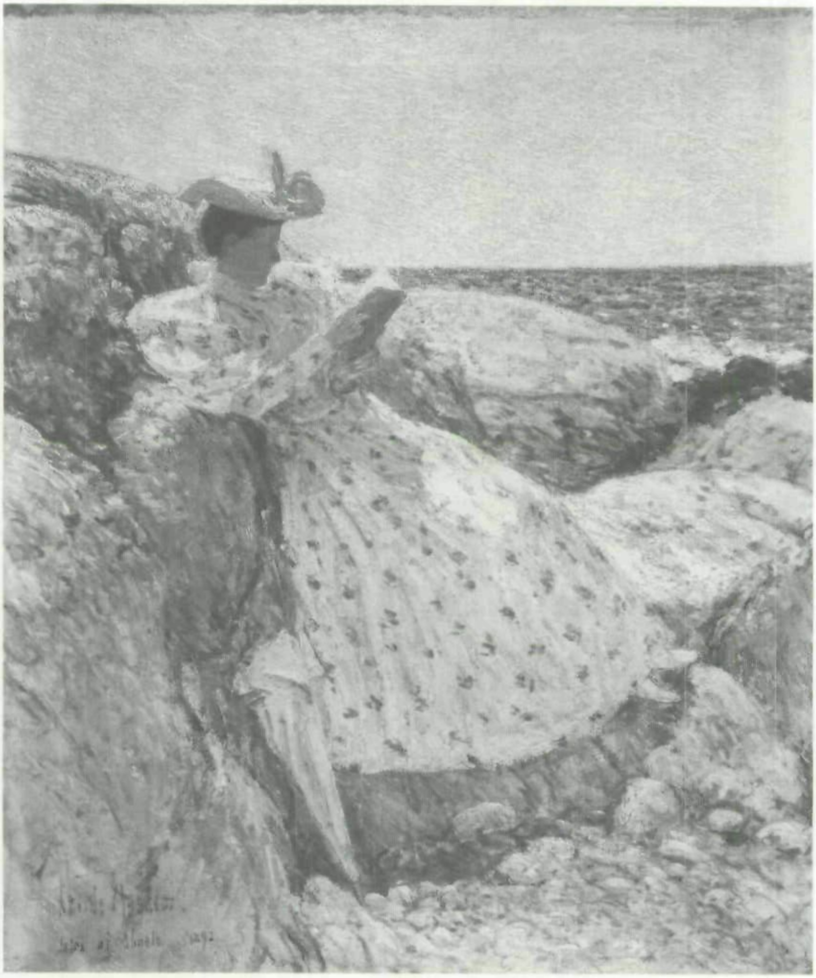

Fig. 18. Childe Hassam, *Summer Sunlight*, 1892. Oil on canvas. The Israel Museum, Jerusalem.

celebrated female idleness without impinging on traditional views of female duty by placing the novel reader in nature, on vacation, rather than in the home.

In the mid-nineteenth century American artists began to construct narratives around the woman as reader, visual fictions in which female subjects willingly choose familial duty over personal desire. Books in the hands of interrupted readers attest to increased educational opportunities for women, while locating their utility primarily in the home and its analogue, the school. Republican motherhood and domestic feminism joined forces in this period to divide American society definitively into separate spheres. The institutionalization of female education hinged on a cultural consensus that women's public power resided in their private influence.

Yet education, and particularly reading, threatened the stability of the status quo. By stimulating the female imagination, novels could lead to loss of virtue or its equivalent, neglect of duty. The tension Alcott described (and American women experienced) between social obligation and self-satisfaction was glossed in images that interpreted isolated reading as a form of bourgeois leisure. In representations of this type, however, male artists, for the first time, showed women fully absorbed in the act of reading. While the interrupted reader's character was expressed by what she does for others, the isolated reader—who would reappear in the next century—was characterized by what she reads.

TURN-OF-THE-CENTURY IMPRESSIONISM: CULTIVATED AND WORLDLY

Between the Civil War and World War I, American women secured a place in the realm of higher education. They attained this goal by various institutional avenues: public and private, religious and secular, coeducational and single-sex. The cult of True Womanhood remained a backdrop for educational progress; at their founding, the first all-female colleges—Vassar (1865), Wellesley and Smith (1875), and Bryn Mawr (1884)—espoused the domestic ideology of the antebellum seminaries. For men, a liberal arts curriculum was considered a foundation for advanced study; for women, it was often viewed as learning for its own sake. As work became professionalized in the late nineteenth century, female collegians struggled to reconcile new career ambitions with traditional beliefs that women's usefulness lay in voluntary service. Despite uncertainty about the proper applicability of their knowledge, however, females excelled in college courses and frequently outperformed their male contemporaries. Their unanticipated success gave rise to fears that women were usurping higher education.[59]

Efforts to curtail women's intellectual advancement were couched in scientific argument. In the widely-read *Sex in Education* (1873), Harvard Medical School professor Dr. Edward Clarke claimed that excessive studying diverted a limited supply of vital energy away from essential bodily functions.[60] Whereas antebellum moralists had decried novels as instruments of seduction, postbellum physicians warned that too much reading could inhibit sexual reproduction.[61] Biological determinism sought to restrict not only the degree, but also the scope of women's mental activity. Based on Darwin's belief that the sperm was the agent of evolutionary change, educators in this period characterized males as innovators, females as conservators. They concluded that men should receive technical and scientific education as a basis for future discoveries, while women should be schooled in historical and cultural subjects to fill their role as caretakers of past achievements.[62]

Male artists working in New England subscribed to this conservative division of the sexes. At the turn of the century, a group known as the Boston School eschewed the narrative content of earlier genre painting and viewed the real world as a source of raw material for the visual expression of ideals of beauty.[63] Women figure prominently in Boston School pictures; situated in aesthetically arranged interiors, they appear to be elements of still life. New York realist Guy Pène du Bois observed,

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[59] Solomon, *In the Company of Educated Women*, 43–61.

[60] Carroll Smith-Rosenberg and Charles Rosenberg, 'The Female Animal: Medical and Biological Views of Woman and Her Role in Nineteenth-Century America,' *Journal of American History* 60 (September 1973): 339–42; and Solomon, *In the Company of Educated Women*, 56-57.

[61] Female physicians challenged male claims that mental exertion was potentially injurious to women's health. Dr. Sarah Stevenson, for example, blamed restrictive fashions, saying, 'Looks, not books, are the murderers of American women.' Quoted in Smith-Rosenberg and Rosenberg, 343. On the corset, see Helene E. Roberts, 'The Exquisite Slave: The Role of Clothes in the Making of the Victorian Woman,' *Signs* 2 (1977): 554–69.

[62] Janice Law Trecker, 'Sex, Science, and Education,' *American Quarterly* 26 (October 1974): 360–62.

[63] On the Boston School, see Trevor J. Fairbrother, *The Bostonians: Painters of an Elegant*

> These figures . . . never do things . . . they live serene uneventful lives, . . . amid serene, dignified, tasteful surroundings. . . . But these figures are not, after all, important parts of the picture. They are not more important than the Chippendale chair, the waxed floor, the mahogany, the blue and white porcelain.[64]

Bernice Kramer Leader has called attention to the antifeminism inherent in such images, which she interprets as a pictorial response to a historical increase in female activism. Her analysis, while persuasive, equates reading with doing needlework, playing an instrument, or admiring porcelain or jewelry as a 'means of idling away the hours.'[65] Yet Boston School paintings bespeak real changes in American society as well as male ideals of leisured femininity. In two new interpretations of the isolated reader, these artists distinguished different types by their association with specific texts.

Culture, as symbolized by art, is the domain of the first of these types, who reads pictures instead of words.[66] In William

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Age, 1870–1930, exh. cat. (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 1986); Bernice Kramer Leader, 'The Boston School and Vermeer,' *Arts* 55 (November 1980): 172–76, and 'Antifeminism in the Paintings of the Boston School,' *Arts* 56 (January 1982): 112–19. See also, Bernice Kramer Leader, 'The Boston Lady as a Work of Art: Paintings by the Boston School at the Turn of the century' (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1980).

[64] Guy Pène du Bois, 'The Boston Group of Painters: An Essay on Nationalism in Art,' *Arts and Decoration* 5 (October 1915): 459.

[65] Leader, 'Antifeminism,' 112.

[66] Art, in an amateur sense, had long been deemed an appropriate area of interest for American women. In the colonial period, young girls might study music, dancing, drawing, needlework, and handicrafts at so-called 'adventure schools.' Spring, *The American School*, 115. After the Revolution, their descendents continued to cultivate their talents in these areas and expanded their field to include watercolor painting, interior decoration, and landscape gardening. Most nineteenth-century women found creative outlets in the decorative arts, which were associated with the eye and hand rather than the mind, yet a growing number achieved recognition in the fine arts after the Civil War. See William C. Brownell, 'The Younger Painters of America. III,' *Scribner's Monthly* 22 (July 1881): 326–34; and Whitney Chadwick, *Women, Art, and Society* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1990): 210–35. At the end of the century, women also began to play a significant role as patrons and collectors. See Erica Hirshler, 'The Great Collectors: Isabella Stewart Gardner and Her Sisters,' in *Pilgrims and Pioneers: New England Women in the Arts*, eds. Alicia Faxon and

McGregor Paxton's *The Yellow Jacket* (fig. 19) of 1907, a young woman leafs through a volume of printed reproductions in a dimly lit interior.[67] The woman's standing pose and the way her hands rest lightly on the pages of the art book imply a passing interest, as does the guitar that leans against the wall behind her. Although she appears dilettantish, the association with both art and music strengthens the impression of aesthetic cultivation. Paxton's picture has a luxurious spareness reminiscent of Copley's portraits of venerable readers. Like his colonial predecessor, the Boston School painter used realistically rendered objects to represent ideals of female character.

While American art collections paled beside European galleries in the nineteenth century, reproductions had long made knowledge of great works available to bourgeois homes. Following the 1876 Centennial, a growing national interest in art coupled with improvements in technical processes sparked production of a spate of illustrated folio volumes that were aesthetic objects in themselves. These lavish art books replaced the popular Christmas gift books, whose blend of genteel literature and engraved illustrations had catered to middle-class morality and family reading.[68] In the 1903 *Atlantic Monthly*, Royal Cortissoz reported proudly, 'Publishers have found that a book on art intelligently written, well illustrated with photogravures or half-tones, or both, and printed and bound in good taste, pays quite as well as the monstrosity of a former day.'[69] Turn-of-the-century art books united high-quality images with critical texts and were touted as a source of artistic education. Deluxe editions, sold to wealthy col-

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Sylvia Moore (New York: Midmarch Arts Press, 1987), 25–31; and Kathleen D. McCarthy, *Women's Culture: American Philanthropy and Art, 1830–1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 149–76.

[67] On *The Yellow Jacket*, see Ellen Wardell Lee, *William McGregor Paxton, 1869–1941*, exh. cat. (Indianapolis: Indianapolis Museum of Art, 1979), 125.

[68] See Katherine Martinez, 'Messengers of Love, Tokens of Friendship: Gift Book Illustrations by John Sartain,' in *The American Illustrated Book in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Gerald W. R. Ward (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1987), 89–112.

[69] Royal Cortissoz, 'New Aspects of Art Study,' *The Atlantic Monthly* 91 (June 1903): 832.

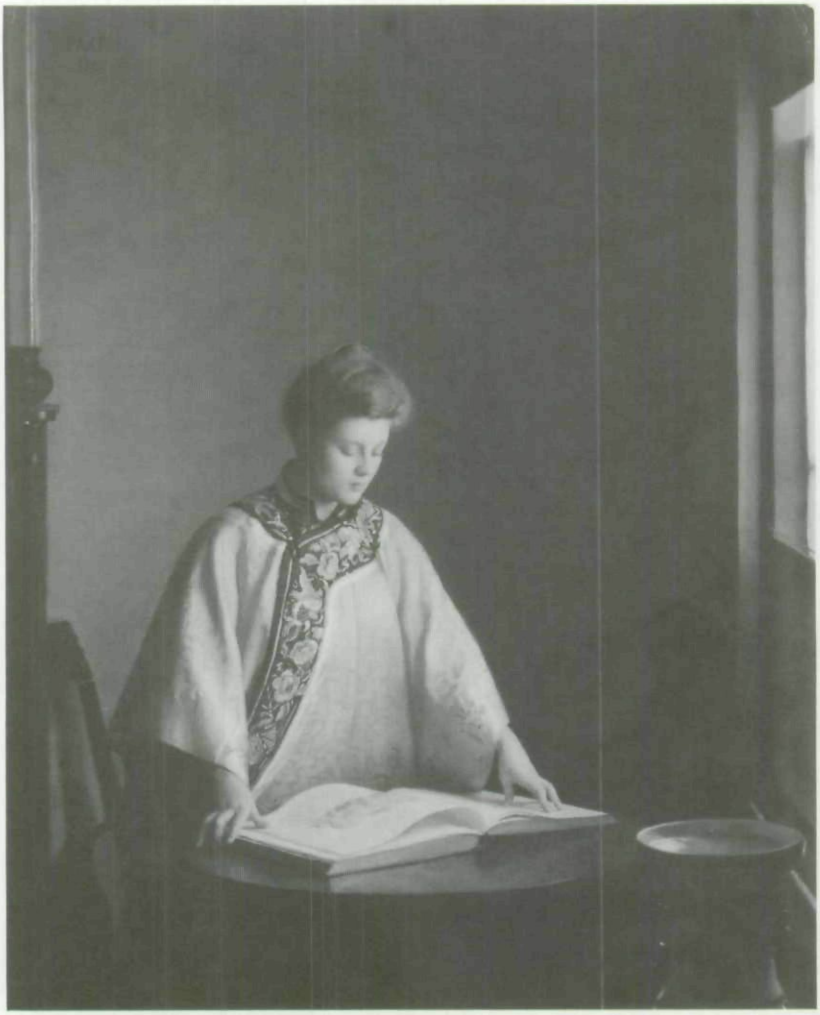

Fig. 19. William McGregor Paxton, *The Yellow Jacket*, 1907. Oil on canvas. Patricia and Richard Anawalt.

lectors by subscription, possessed added value as emblems of elite status.[70]

While art books were a means of improving taste and display-ing wealth, they also appealed to longings for spiritual uplift in a materialistic age. The moral content assigned to art by Boston School painters informs Edmund C. Tarbell's 1909 *Girl Reading* (fig. 20), in which a young woman bends over an illustrated folio volume in a prayerful pose.[71] Other objects in the room, a seventeenth-century gateleg table and Chinese porcelain jar, recall New England's colonial past, a time idealized for its religious and social purity.[72] Golden light that streams in through the window enhances Tarbell's vision of reading pictures as a means of transcending present-day vulgarities.

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[70] See H. Barbara Weinberg, Doreen Bolger, and David Park Curry, *American Impressionism and Realism: The Painting of Modern Life*, exh. cat. (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1994), 253.

The belief that art could lead viewers to a higher realm of understanding was a common theme in self-culture books written in this period. In *How to Enjoy Pictures*, Mabel Swan Emery extolled the power of reproductions to bring ordinary people into touch with nature and, more important, with the ideas and emotions it had kindled in 'great men' of history. Emery claimed, 'If we can gradually learn to look with their clearer eyes and to see the beauty which delighted their more appreciative souls, our own world becomes larger and lovelier.'[73] While study of art in reproduction might elevate the aesthetic sense, it also had a short-term therapeutic value. Emery equated paintings with nature, books, and music in their ability 'to make us forget weariness and worries.'[74] Given that women were the most frequent sufferers of nervous disorders in this period, it seems likely that she conceived her readership to be primarily female. By advocating a self-effacing, escapist approach to art, she made it a sedative rather than a solution for frustration.

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71. According to Patricia Jobe Pierce, this painting was commissioned by Charlotte Barton, one of Tarbell's favorite models. It may be a sign of aspiration that Barton appears here as a cultivated rather than a worldly type of reader, as discussed below. Patricia Jobe Pierce, *Edmund C. Tarbell and the Boston School of Painting, 1889–1980* (Hingham, Mass.: Pierce Galleries, 1980), 195.

72. See Celia Betsky, 'Inside the Past: The Interior and the Colonial Revival in American Art and Literature, 1860–1914,' in *The Colonial Revival in America*, ed. Alan Axelrod (New York: W. W. Norton and Company), 241–77. On Tarbell's antiques, see Trevor J. Fairbrother, 'Edmund C. Tarbell's Paintings of Interiors,' *Antiques* 131 (January 1987): 230–32.

73. Mabel Swan Emery, *How to Enjoy Pictures*, 6th ed. (Boston: Prang Educational Company, 1898), 2.

74. Emery, *How to Enjoy Pictures*, 4.

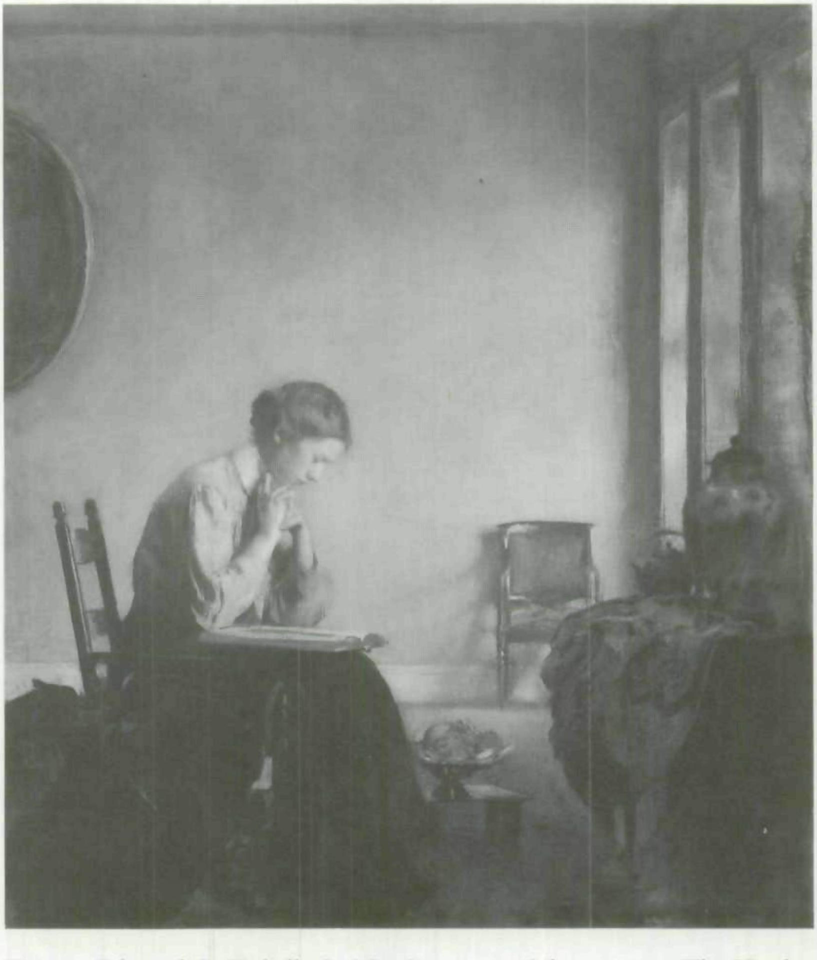

Fig. 20. Edmund C. Tarbell, *Girl Reading*, 1909. Oil on canvas. The Hayden Collection. Courtesy Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

By the early twentieth century, other American women had begun to look critically at their world and to espouse public activism rather than private escapism.[75] Much of their work—in teaching, nursing, and charity—extended the boundaries of domestic responsibility. Concurrent with 'municipal housekeeping' initia-

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[75] See Glenda Riley, *Inventing the American Woman: A Perspective on Women's History* (Arlington Heights, Ill.: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 1987), chap. 6, '"Reordering Women's Sphere": The Progressive Era, 1890–1917,' 153–81.

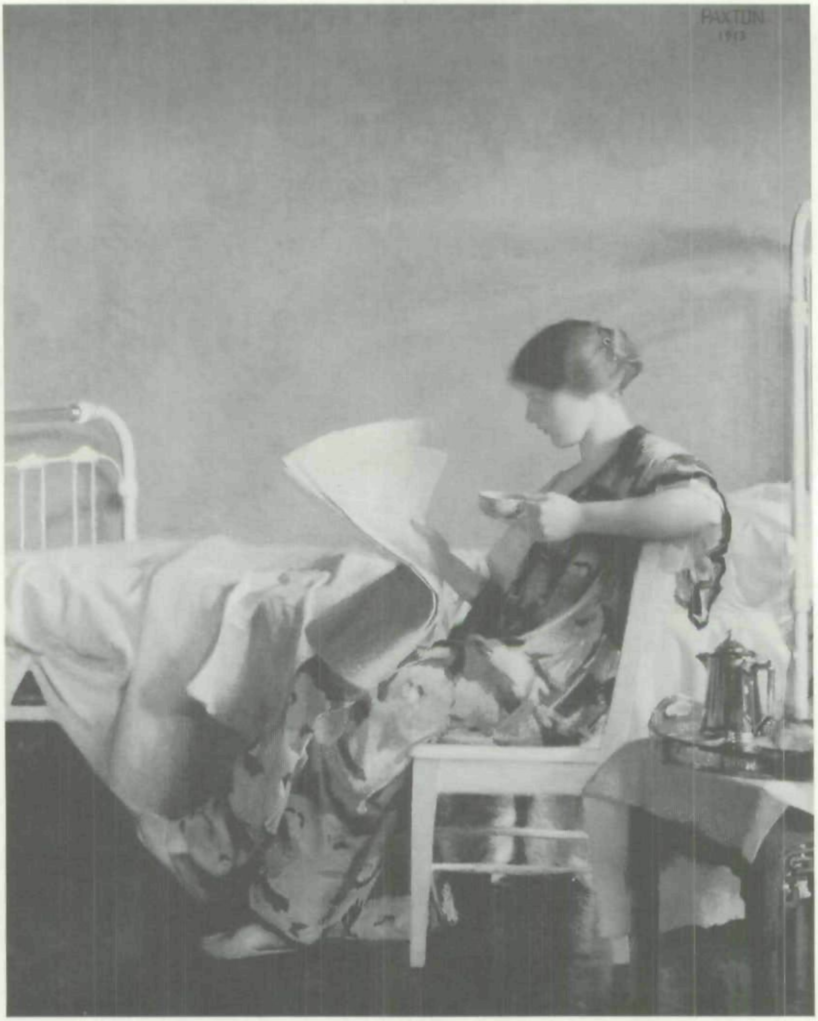

Fig. 21. William McGregor Paxton, *The Morning Paper*, 1913. Oil on canvas. Marie and Hugh Halff.

tives, radical feminists crusaded for social change in the form of equal rights. Along with the vote, their top priorities included birth control and higher education.

The campaign for women's rights filled the pages of the newspaper, which in Boston School paintings identifies a second, worldly type of reader. At first glance, Paxton's *The Morning Paper* (fig. 21) of 1913 resembles Tarbell's *Girl Reading* in its quietism, interior setting, and profile pose.[76] Yet closer comparison reveals the gulf that separates these isolated females. While Tarbell's 'girl' has an air of modest deference, Paxton's figure is both pretentious and exposed. Cloaked in attributes of leisure, she is, in fact, a servant, who reads the newspaper in a spartanly furnished room.[77] Behind the colorful kimono, silver tea service, and fretted table (cast off or surreptitiously borrowed), her status is betrayed by the painted chair and single unmade bed.[78] Paxton takes liberties with the body of this working woman whose breast protrudes softly from her open robe. While she concentrates on her reading, the viewer is invited to contemplate her charms.

Sexuality rather than intellectuality also defines the newspaper reader in Tarbell's *The Breakfast Room* (fig. 22) of 1903. In the corner of a dusky studio, an artist's model leisurely peruses the morning paper while her male companion completes his meal. As in Paxton's *The Morning Paper*, a partially exposed female body and potentially erotic setting belie an initial impression of bourgeois domesticity.[79] The action anticipated by the loosely fitting dress that slips provocatively off the model's shoulder seems completed by the copy of a Titian nude that hangs behind her head. In the seductive atmosphere of the studio, the power implicit in possession of the newspaper evaporates. While cognizant of current events, the working woman, like the works of art and the servant in the background, remains circumscribed by aesthetic boundaries; only the male painter, truncated at right, eludes the confines of a frame.

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[76] On *The Morning Paper*, see Lee, *William McGregor Paxton*, 132. Paxton cast the same model as a servant who is distracted from her work by a novel in *The Housemaid* (1910, Corcoran Gallery of Art). *Ibid.*, 128.

[77] On the image of the servant in Boston School painting, see Elizabeth L. O'Leary, *At Beck and Call: The Representation of Domestic Servants in Nineteenth-Century American Painting* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996), 210–61. O'Leary does not include *The Morning Paper* in her discussion of Paxton's work.

[78] Catharine Beecher advised women to provide servants with single beds 'that they might not be obliged to sleep with all the changing domestics who come and go so often.' Beecher, *American Woman's Home*, 370. The unmade bed in Paxton's picture may allude to the reputation of servants for untidiness.

[79] On the erotic connotations of the studio, see Sarah Burns, 'The Price of Beauty: Art, Commerce, and the Late Nineteenth-Century Studio,' in *American Iconology: New Approaches to Nineteenth-Century Art and Literature*, ed. David C. Miller (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 231–35. On Tarbell's conflation of studio and domestic space, see Linda J. Docherty, 'Model-Families: The Domesticated Studio Pictures of William Merritt Chase and Edmund C. Tarbell,' in *Not at Home: The Suppression of Domesticity in Modern Art and Architecture*, ed. Christopher Reed (London: Thames and Hudson, 1996), 48–64.

During the early decades of the republic, newspapers had been the province of white male readers, who alone possessed the suffrage and the power to govern national affairs.[80] By the end of the nineteenth century, however, they catered increasingly to the female population through consumer advertisements and the syndicated 'women's page.' Women also began to make professional careers in journalism in this period; from contributing articles on society, manners, or travel they worked their way to reporting hard news. Although excluded from top editorial and management positions, women proved themselves, as journalists, to be more than scribblers of sentimental fiction.[81]

While women were earning recognition as newspaper writers, highbrow critics disparaged journalism as a superficial brand of literature. William J. Stillman, for example, divided humanity into journalists and 'eternalists,' characterizing the former as utilitarian and materialist, the latter as impractical and immortal. Stillman claimed that the daily paper's focus on information versus knowledge fed a contemporary lust for wealth and power. In his view, the corrective for 'newspaper education' was culture—a 'noble art' of books, pictures, and statues—which led readers to an apprehension of timeless truths.[82]

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[80] On the newspaper in antebellum genre painting, see Bryan Wolf, 'All the World's a Code: Art and Ideology in Nineteenth-Century American Painting,' *Art Journal* 44 (Winter 1984): 332–33.

[81] Marion Marzolf, *Up from the Footnote: A History of Women Journalists* (New York: Hastings House, Publishers, 1977), 20–29.

[82] William J. Stillman, 'Journalism and Literature,' *Atlantic Monthly* 68 (November 1891): 687–95.

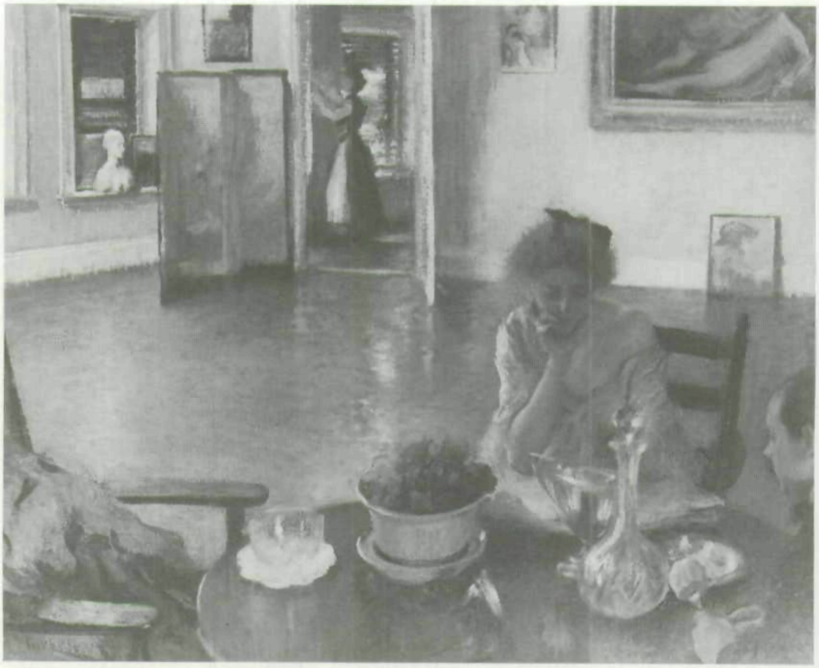

Fig. 22. Edmund C. Tarbell, *The Breakfast Room*, c. 1903. Oil on canvas. Courtesy the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia. Gift of Clement B. Newbold.

The difference between cultivation and worldliness in Boston School paintings of women as readers parallels Stillman's opposition of the eternal to the here-and-now. Women looking at art books pay homage to enduring aesthetic and spiritual values and preserve the traditional separation of male and female spheres. Those who read newspapers, by contrast, immerse themselves in current events and take possession of a pictorial attribute commonly reserved for men. In both interpretations of women reading, female sexuality provides the clue to the painter's moral judgment; while the woman of leisure is modest and reverent, the working woman is alluring and implicitly available. Alternatively admired and desired, these different types of readers are equally objectified. In their common isolation, they provide corroborating testimony to male discomfiture with educated females and their social progress.

WOMEN ARTISTS: ALTERNATIVE INTERPRETATIONS

While American men drew sharp distinctions between cultivation and worldliness, women in the early twentieth century sought to find a common ground between the two. For them, the challenge was to reconcile private domesticity with public professionalism and thus free themselves from the restrictions each alone imposed. In 1900 a Radcliffe graduate wrote, 'I hang in a void midway between two spheres. A professional career puts me beyond reach of the average woman's duties and pleasures, but the conventional limitations of the female lot put me beyond reach of the average man's duties and pleasures.'[83]

A vision of synthesis distinguishes the art of female painters of the Boston School, who shared the formal concerns and iconographic interests of their male contemporaries. Two of them, Ellen Day Hale and Lilian Westcott Hale, produced nuanced variations on the worldly and cultivated types of woman readers that reflect their individual enterprise and experience. Sisters-in-law, both earned independent recognition as artists without abdicating family responsibilities. Their imagery is in no way radical, yet it represents a kind of female aspiration common among educated women of their day.

Twenty-six years apart in age, Ellen Day Hale and Lilian Westcott Hale brought different temperaments to art. Ellen, the elder, who never married, shared a studio on Cape Ann with Gabriele Clements, her companion, and a host of other women artists. Lilian, by contrast, worked in isolation at her home in Dedham, Massachusetts, with her husband, Ellen's brother Philip Leslie Hale, as her most valued and constant critic. Recalling summers spent together at her aunt's house, Lilian's daughter, Nancy, observed,

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[83] Quoted in Riley, *Inventing the American Woman*, 164.

> My mother was a different—a solitary—kind of painter. Close to her, I had experienced art as a lonely, mystical pursuit. Here at Aunt Nelly's for the first time I saw art lived corporately—a shared vocation to be embarked on daily with cries of joy.[84]

Ellen's gregariousness and Lilian's introversion marked their roles within their families and their own character as readers. As the eldest child and only daughter of Unitarian preacher Edward Everett Hale, Ellen took care of a semi-invalid mother, helped to raise seven younger brothers, and watched over a 'famous, sought-after, impractical, extrovert father.'[85] Between 1904 and 1909 she served as the latter's hostess in Washington, D.C., while he was chaplain of the United States Senate. Even as an old woman, her niece reported, Ellen '[kept] up through the newspapers and her correspondence with politics and the government.'[86] Unfailingly dutiful toward her family, she was also worldly in orientation.

For Lilian, who shrank from public life, reading was associated with the immediate family circle.[87] Both her husband and her daughter were book lovers, and Philip liked nothing better than to see his wife looking 'romantically beautiful' and listening as he read aloud by the fire after dinner. Vision, however, dominated Lilian's own engagement with books. Nancy Hale described her mother's attitude by saying,

> She could never truly sympathize with the seductions of reading that held my father and myself in thrall. She deeply respected the *idea* of books. I can see her, *Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres* lying open on her lap, beside the fire in the evening. She is turning its pages, gravely. But it is the illustrations that hold her.[88]

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[84] Nancy Hale, *The Life in the Studio* (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1969), 105.

[85] Hale, *Life in the Studio*, 105. For biographical information on Ellen Day Hale, see Martha J. Hoppin, 'Women Artists in Boston, 1870–1900: The Pupils of William Morris Hunt,' *American Art Journal* 13 (Winter 1981): 37–42; Fairbrother, *The Bostonians*, 209-10; and *American Women Artists 1830–1930*, exh. cat. (Washington, D.C.: National Museum of Women in the Arts, 1987), cat. 14.

[86] Hale, *Life in the Studio*, 113.

[87] For biographical information on Lilian Westcott Hale, see Hale, *Life in the Studio*; Fairbrother, *The Bostonians*, 210; and *American Women Artists*, cat. 53.

[88] Hale, *Life in the Studio*, 86–88.

Ever the artist, Lilian read pictures with the passion others felt for words.

As accomplished professional women whose personal lives bespoke respect for traditional domesticity, Ellen Day Hale and Lilian Westcott Hale represented the worldly and cultivated types of readers in terms that were their own. In *Morning News* (fig. 23), painted by Ellen in 1905, a woman with a Gibson Girl profile pauses to ponder the latest headlines.[89] She stands to read—unlike Paxton and Tarbell's worldly women—filling up the picture space. While the male artists cast the faces of their figures into shadow, the female painter bathes a firmly delineated head in light. Attentive to events outside the home, Ellen's newspaper reader also fits comfortably in woman's 'proper sphere.' Behind her, we see traditional feminine attributes: a picture, a tea set, and a vase of flowers. On a low table, a pile of books indicates this reader's ability to move freely from journalism to the higher realm of literature. Without pandering to male desire, Ellen creates a picture of an educated woman who is both active and attractive.[90]

While Ellen Day Hale claimed that worldliness was compatible with femininity, Lilian Westcott Hale equated cultivation with mental labor. In *L'Edition de Luxe* (fig. 24) of 1910 she shows a young woman seated before a window with an illustrated folio volume.[91] The choice of decorative accessories distinguishes Lilian's interpretation of the cultivated reader from those by Paxton and Tarbell. The former's silk jacket and guitar and the

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89. On *Morning News*, see *American Women Artists*, cat. 52. The morning paper was associated primarily with men at the breakfast table and on their way to work. Afternoon and Sunday editions were directed more toward women in the home. See Frank Luther Mott, *American Journalism: A History, 1690–1960*, 3d. ed. (New York: Macmillan Company, 1962), 598.

90. Ellen's newspaper reader may be classified as a 'Beautiful Charmer,' one of three turn-of-the-century types of American Girl. According to Martha Banta, the Charmer was physically alluring but without strong sexual appetite. A 'roses-at-the-breast' formula for this type (seen in *Morning News*) was used for portraits of feminist leaders, presumably to affirm the sitter's femininity. See Martha Banta, *Imaging American Women: Idea and Ideals in Cultural History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 45–74.

91. On *L'Edition de Luxe*, see Troyen, *The Boston Tradition*, 198; and *American Women Artists*, cat. 53.

latter's gateleg table and porcelain jar are studio props that recur in their compositions. Attention lavished by male artists on such signature details diverts attention from the action represented to their own creative practice. In Lilian's picture, by contrast, a flowering hawthorn branch functions as a metaphor for the woman reading; the fallen blossom on the polished table rhymes with her left hand.[92] Although set in an aesthetic arrangement, the branch, like the female figure, displays signs of inner life.

Lilian's cultivated reader has an intensity that is lacking in paintings by her male contemporaries. While Paxton's woman fingers the pages of the art book, Lilian's embraces it. While Tarbell's figure seems to pray over a picture, Lilian's scrutinizes it at close range. Her relationship with images is both more intimate and more intellectual; lost in concentration, she has slid far to one side of the ladderback chair. In *L'Edition de Luxe*, Lilian shows a female who looks at pictures from both an appreciative and a critical perspective. Facing the viewer as she does, the woman with the art book is aptly suggestive of self-portraiture.

The correctives Ellen Day Hale and Lilian Westcott Hale applied to early twentieth-century images of women as readers are modest from a feminist perspective. On the surface, their genteel figures exemplify the silent isolation that men found reassuring in a context of demand for social change.[93] To disregard or belittle incremental differences in the visual record is, however, to forget the internal conflict American women experienced as they chipped away at the boundaries that confined them. Each step forward in education, accomplishment, and ambition led them further into 'a void between two spheres,' where the individual female struggled to define herself against the culturally sanctioned type.

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92. On the association of women and flowers, see Annette Stott, 'Floral Femininity: A Pictorial Definition,' *American Art* 6 (Spring 1992): 61–77.

93. The conservatism of female artists may be explained in part by the fact that men were the primary purchasers of paintings in this period. See Leader, 'Antifeminism,' 141–43.

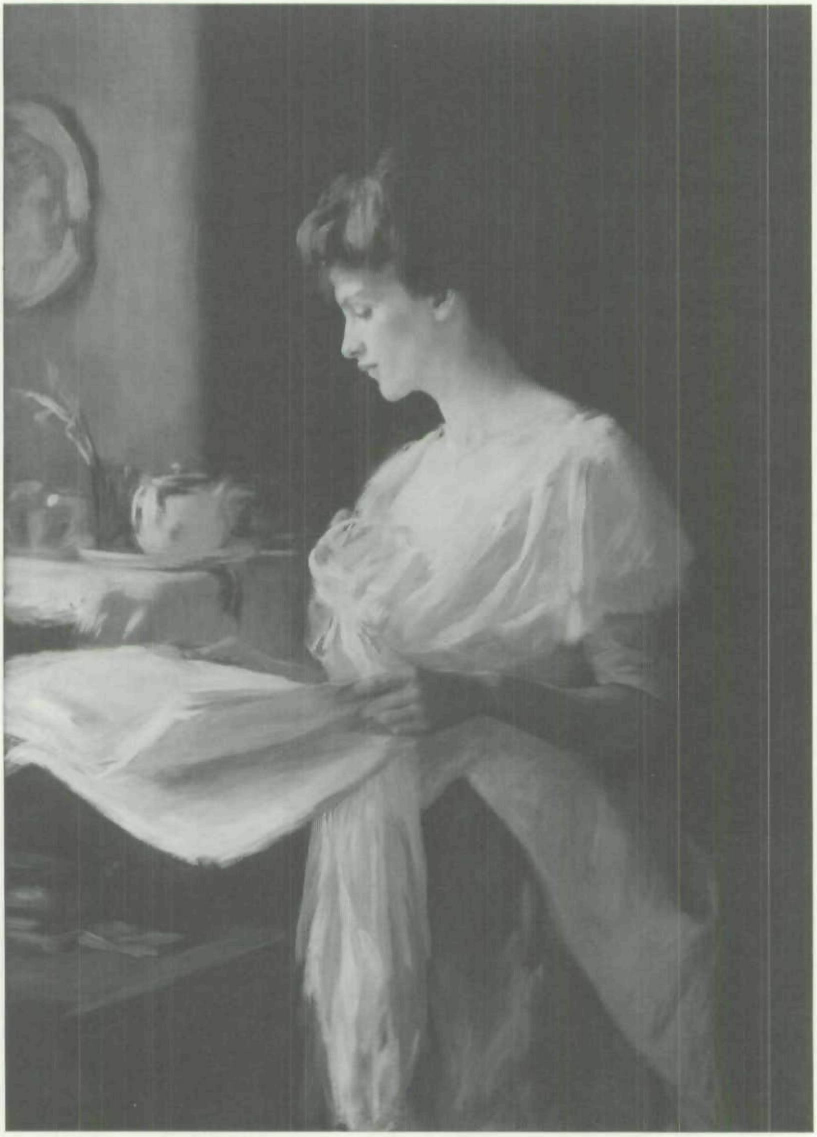

Fig. 23. Ellen Day Hale, *Morning News*, 1905. Oil on canvas. Private collection.

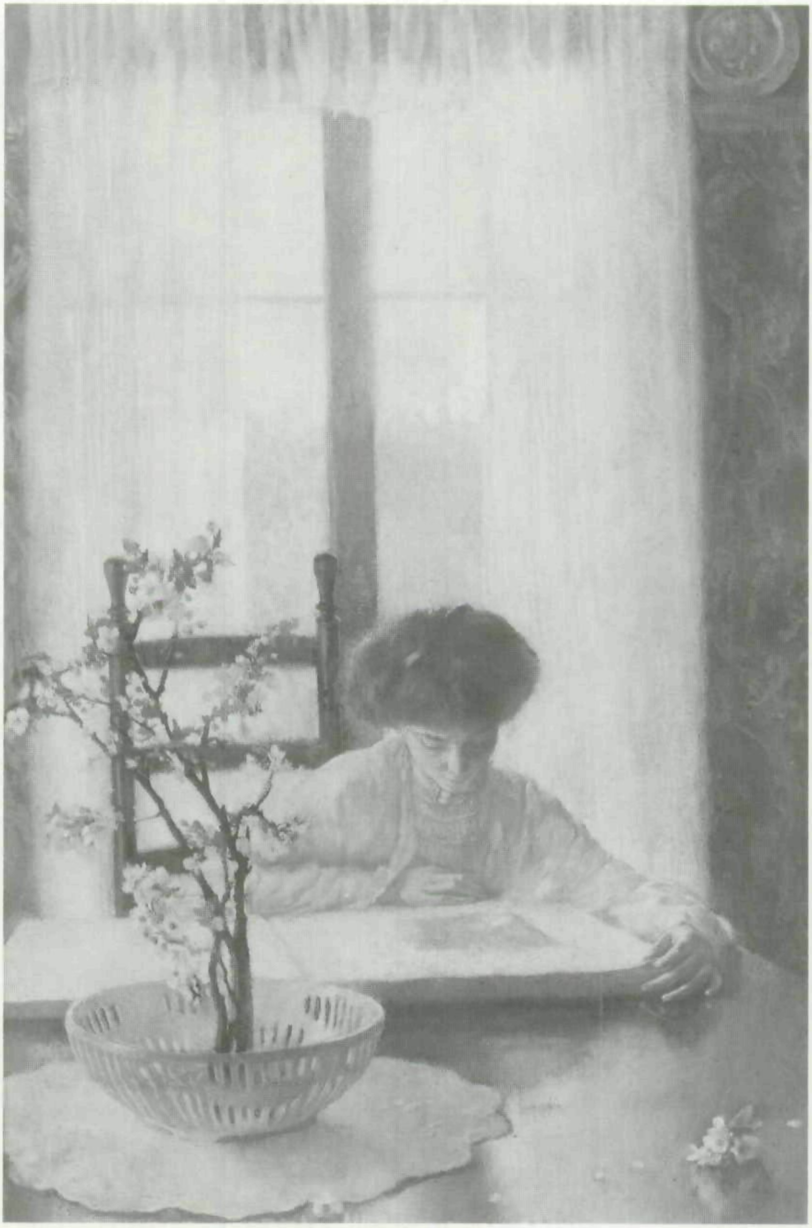

Fig. 24. Lilian Westcott Hale, *L'Edition De Luxe*, 1910. Oil on canvas. Gift of Miss Mary C. Wheelwright. Courtesy Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

CONCLUSION

The woman as reader has been a recurrent and protean theme in American painting, interpreted primarily through the eyes of men. During the colonial period, when girls had minimal schooling, books functioned as attributes of passivity and piety in portraits of conjugal and venerable types. As literacy grew more widespread after the Revolution, images of educated females reflected a concomitant potential for social change. The material type laid bourgeois claim to elite status through display of consumer goods; more rarely seen, the cerebral type honored exceptional females whom men admired for their minds.

In the mid-nineteenth century, genre painting became a theater for representing the effects of women's education and contrasting types according to conventional gender norms. Interrupted readers were cast as models of service in the home and school, while females who read for their own pleasure were banished from the sanctity of the domestic sphere. Artists first placed the isolated reader in nature, with a novel, but subsequently moved her to the interior in opposing guises. Turn-of-the-century impressionists used art books and newspapers to distinguish cultivated leisure from worldly labor. Only female painters had the power (or desire) to conceive synthetic representations that collapsed the artificial boundaries of type.

Certain themes persist throughout this pictorial evolution, most notably, the impulse to marry female literacy to spirituality. From prayer books to art books, reading raises women above, and sets them apart from, the secular world, fitting them to be guardians of both personal and national morality. Reading may also precipitate a fall from grace, however, by seducing the imagination (the novel) or focusing attention on earthly affairs (the newspaper). For the male artist, the body of the woman as reader is the marker of her character. Those who transgress through isolation and/or worldliness become increasingly alluring; others who adhere to traditional morality look first like men and ultimately like decorative objets d'art. The suppression of female physicality in images of virtuous types of readers signifies their impotence. Though ostensibly more vulnerable, sexually desirable women posed a greater real-life challenge to masculine hegemony.

In the context of American educational history, different pictorial types of readers document and interpret social change. As long as schooling remained minimal, a fictive iconography of books affirmed ideals of virtuous female character. With expanded educational opportunities, women in art began to open books, as well as hold them, and to make choices about whether and what to read. When college-trained females moved out of the private sphere and into public life, representations of reading became, by contrast, increasingly interiorized. The gulf between types widened, and art, as a judgment on educated women, expressed opinions ranging from anxiety to desire.

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