



February 2012



***Mrs. Richard Alsop***

1792

**Ralph Earl**

Born: Massachusetts 1751

Died: Bolton, Connecticut 1801

oil on canvas

45 5/8 x 24 1/4 in. (115.8 x 61.7 cm)

Smithsonian American Art Museum

Museum purchase and gift of Joseph Alsop  
1975.49.1

[Collections Webpage and High Resolution Image](#)

***At first glance the portrait of Mrs. Richard Alsop seems like your typical late eighteenth-century vision of a newly minted American woman – one who is pictured with all the trappings of wealth coveted by society. Yet upon further inspection her direct, stern gaze suggests a new American hardiness not seen in portraits prior to the Revolution. But what lies beneath Mrs. Richard Alsop’s resolute façade? Who is the woman behind the portrait? What is her story? Additionally, what is the story of the painting? Researcher Laura devised the following initial questions to help guide the path of her research.***

- **Who was Mrs. Richard Alsop?**
- **Is the land behind Mrs. Alsop a specific landscape?**

To begin my research, I wanted to find out if there were any details that showed who this woman was and how if at all, she and her family fit into the events that shaped the birth of our nation during the late eighteenth-century. A recent publication (Kornhauser, 1991), which corresponded to an exhibition of Earl’s paintings, provided me with a brief biography on Mary Alsop which gave me clues and keywords

as to where to next direct my search to find out more about the life of Mary Alsop. From this information provided in the catalogue, I was able to learn that despite having to raise ten children and run her husband's mercantile business after his death, Mary Alsop still had time for a hobby: needlework. I found [an early example of her work](#) in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. It was created in 1754 when Mary was fourteen years old. The information accompanying her work on the museum's website states that "Mary may have attended a school run by Mrs. Sarah Osborn" and that "Mary completed at least two pictures based on engravings depicting the four seasons."

This finding led me to question whether it was possible if some of Mary's other needlework creations were in existence. A quick search on Worldcat of Mary's full name (Mary Wright Alsop) led me to an excellent catalogue that accompanied an exhibition entitled "Mary Wright Alsop (1740-1829) and Her Needlework." The exhibition was produced by the Connecticut Historical Society in 1987. The catalogue includes about thirty black and white

photographs of items she created. Among these are embroidered slip seats for chairs, worked pocketbooks for various members of her family, knitted silk purses, pincushions, and needlecases. From there I was able to see what collections her creations resided in and I was able to find out further information on them.

Additionally, the Connecticut Historical Society exhibition catalogue provided me with wonderfully detailed biographical information that allowed me to answer many other questions I had about Mary's life. It also included photographs of various properties owned once by various members of Mary's family. One of these photographs depicts the Joseph Wright Farmhouse, the very house purported by family history to be the one in which Ralph Earl painted the portraits of Mary and her mother Hannah Gilbert. I wondered next if it would be possible to determine if the landscape seen in the window behind Mary is an actual vantage point and thus could have been seen by Earl when he painted Mary's portrait.

In the recent exhibition catalogue on Earl's work (Kornhauser, 1991), I discovered that Ralph Earl was one of the first American artists to really take an interest in true topographical renderings of landscapes. He created many landscape paintings during his time as an itinerant painter in New England. Additionally he was commissioned to create landscape paintings of his patron's land, often while he was working on their portraits. This evidence suggested to me that the landscape we see in this portrait was a true rendition. The exhibition of Mary Alsop's needlework produced by the Connecticut Historical Society provided me with an approximate address of where the house would be today (it was move to a

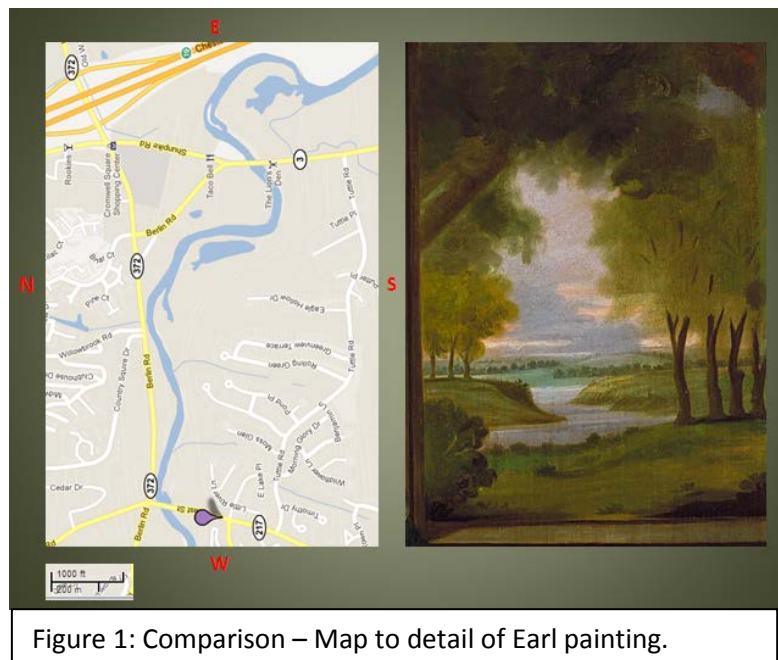


Figure 1: Comparison – Map to detail of Earl painting.

different location during the 1980s). The catalogue lists that the Joseph Wright Farmhouse was located at what is now 1181 East Street in Westfield, CT. Using Google Maps, I then located the address on a map and then compared the curvature of the river to what can be seen in Mary's portrait. As you can see from figure 1, the house was located where the purple bubble is on the map and Earl was looking out a window that faced east. The curvatures of the river on the map and in the portrait matched up quite well.

The inclusion of the actual property and the river more importantly refers to how the Alsop's earned a living. Both the Alsop's and the Wright's (Mary's parents) were in the mercantile business, a business which depended on river access to the sea. After the death of Richard Alsop in 1776, Mary assumed management of her husband's mercantile business, which according to the Connecticut Historical Society's exhibition catalogue, dealt primarily with West Indies trade; exporting horses and other goods to the West Indies and importing rum, indigo, molasses and coffee back to Connecticut. In addition to her management responsibilities, Mary Alsop went on to raise ten children after her husband's death, who at the time ranged in age from two months old to fifteen years. For future research I would like to examine the following questions at length:

- **What was widowhood like for women in the late eighteenth-century? With the advent of the new American Republic, did more widows begin to adopt a less traditional role with regards to not remarrying and managing the family business, just like Mrs. Alsop?**
- **What does the abundance of embroidered material tell us about the sitter? Does its use in the composition indicate something other than wealth?**

**Bibliography: Ralph Earl, *Mrs. Richard Alsop***

Kornhauser, Elizabeth Mankin. *Ralph Earl: The Face of the Young Republic*. Hartford: Yale University Press, 1991. Exhibition catalogue.

Krueger, Glee. "Mary Wright Alsop, 1740-1829, and Her Needlework" *The Connecticut Historical Society Bulletin*. Volume 52, Summer/ Fall (1987): 125-229.

Metropolitan Museum of Art. "Mary Wright: 'Spring' (46.155)". In *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. Accessed October 3, 2011. <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/46.155>.