

Elizabeth Mary Thomas Soper (1785-1813), c. 1804

Attr. Gerrit Schipper (1775-c. 1830)

pastel on paper

5 x 6 5/8 (12.80 x 16.80)

Gift of Jules David Prown, 1998

Hewes Number: 105

Ex. Coll.: Sitter; to Isaiah Thomas, Sr. (cat. 123 et seq.); to sitter's son Isaiah Thomas Soper; purchased from George Gravert in 1956 by the donor.

A niece of Isaiah Thomas, Sr. (cat. 123 et seq.), Elizabeth Mary Thomas was born in South Hempstead, Long Island, on January 10, 1785. Her father, Peter, was the brother of Isaiah Thomas, Sr.; her mother was Peter's second wife. Peter had grown up in Hempstead with relatives of his mother after she moved to Boston with his siblings Isaiah, Joshua, and Susanna. Isaiah Thomas, Sr., adopted Elizabeth, who was known in the family as Eliza, while she was a young child, and he made provision for her in his 1792 will, while Peter was still alive. From entries in Isaiah's diary, we know that Eliza was an active member of the family and that she travelled to Boston and other towns with him and other relatives. Isaiah noted, for example, that in August 1807 they went up the cupola of the State House in Boston and that he gave the young woman twelve and a half dollars. In November 1807 he gave her a velvet pelisse--a long, warm overcoat.¹

On December 5, 1811, in a ceremony performed in Worcester by the Reverend Aaron Bancroft (cat. 4), Eliza married Stephen Thayer Soper, who kept a livery stable on Milk Street in Boston. Their son, Isaiah Thomas Soper, was born on August 19, 1812. She died less than a year later in Braintree, Massachusetts, where she is buried.²

The portrait remains in its original frame, backed with the original board. On a paper label in Isaiah Thomas's hand is written: 'This Picture of Elizabeth Mary Soper is to be given to her Son Isaiah Thomas Soper after the Decease of Isaiah Thomas, Nov. 21st, 1818.' Written on the board in a different hand is: 'Elizabeth Mary Thomas. When this Picture was taken Novr. 1804 she was age 19 & 9 months. Married to S. T. Soper on Decr. [5] 1811. Died July 16 1813 at Braintree and there buried.' The inscription on the backing links this portrait to others painted by Schipper (cats. 124-26, 132, 143), who advertised his presence in Worcester in the Worcester Spy during 1804 (see fig. 9).

¹ Isaiah Thomas Diary, 1807, Isaiah Thomas Papers, 1748-1874, AAS Manuscript Collection.

² 'Direct Descendants of Isaiah Thomas,' Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society 30 (October 1920): 265.