

Mary Maccarty West (1750-1803), c. 1790

Anonymous
watercolor on ivory
2 x 1 1/2 (7.30 x 6.35)
Bequest of Dwight Foster Dunn, 1937
Weis 141
Hewes Number: 148

Ex. Coll.: Sitter; possibly to her husband Benjamin West (cat. 145); to his niece Mary Maccarty Stiles (cat. 108); through the Stiles/Foster family to the donor.

Mary Maccarty was the daughter of the Reverend Thaddeus Maccarty (cat. 75) of Worcester, Massachusetts. A family member recalled that after the New Hampshire attorney Benjamin West (cat. 145) returned from several years' residence in the South, he 'ventured to marry the Lady with whom he had for many years been connected by the most sincere and ardent mutual affection viz. Miss Mary, eldest daughter of the Rev'd Mr. Maccarty of Worcester.'¹ The couple married on January 18, 1781, and settled in Charlestown, New Hampshire. Her husband's financial success allowed Mary to manage her household with comfort and ease.²

About 1795, Mary Maccarty West was 'afflicted with a paralysis, which from its commencement rendered her in great measure helpless and for some years before her death, reduced her to a state of infantile weakness both in body and mind.'³ Her husband abandoned his legal practice to care for her. However, lengthy medical treatments did not improve her situation and she died in August 1803, at the age of fifty-two.⁴

This miniature was painted before the sitter's illness. The artist is unidentified, and early ownership of the portrait is unclear. Because the miniature descended with that of Benjamin West, it is possible that he commissioned it. This image of a healthy Mary must have become a cherished object, reflective of better times.

¹ Samuel West Memoirs, 1807, 289, AAS Manuscript Collection.

² Sibley's Harvard Graduates, s.v. 'West, Benjamin.'

³ West Memoirs, 286.

⁴ Farmer's Museum, or Literary Gazette (Walpole, N.H.), August 30, 1803.