

Unknown woman, 1787

Anonymous
pastel on vellum
11 3/4 x 9 1/2 (29.85 x 24.13)
inscribed, l.r.: 'Du---, 1787'
Bequest of Abbott Lawrence Lowell, 1943
Hewes number: 157

Ex. Coll.: Early provenance unknown; owned c. 1870 by Anna Parker Lowell (1856-1930); to her husband, the donor.

Publications:

'A Puzzling Portrait,' The Magazine Antiques 44 (November 1943): 237.

This portrait, once thought to depict Martha Washington (1731-1802), has been the subject of much scrutiny since its arrival at the American Antiquarian Society in 1943. A twentieth-century inscription on the reverse reads 'Martha Washington, 1787,' but there is little other evidence to support this identification of the older woman, who wears a stylish eighteenth-century dress and bonnet. The pastel is dated at the lower right and includes an illegible signature that begins 'Du--'. This has led to speculation that the artist may have been a member of the team Duvivier & Son, who operated a drawing and painting academy in Philadelphia in the 1790s.¹ Other suggestions have included the artists Du Sauw (at work 1794) and John Duval (at work 1794).

That the previous owners often travelled abroad suggests that the pastel may be of European origin. AAS Director Clarence Brigham (cat. 11) wrote in 1943: '[I]t may be of a European lady by an English artist. It is well possible that Mrs. Lowell picked it up in an antique shop and someone penciled Martha Washington's name on the back because it seemed a likely choice.... All we can do for now is to let the portrait stay in the limbo of doubtful pictures and hope for an eventual solution.'²

¹ William Sawitzky to Alice Winchester, November 3, 1943, AAS Archives.

² Clarence Brigham to Sawitzky, November 23, 1943, AAS Archives.