



## HAWTHORNE

### Fine Art

Ellen Wallace Sharples (1769-1849)  
*Portrait of George Washington, c. 1800*  
Pastel on paper  
9 ¼ x 7 ¼ inches

Ellen Sharples was one of the country's first professional women artists. She was born in England to a Quaker family. Ellen Wallace was a pretty talented “young lady of fashion”<sup>1</sup> living with her mother in Bath. Her only known training was with James Sharples, also in Bath. She married the twice-widowed and much older teacher, probably in 1787. She had a son James and a daughter Rolinda, both of whom also became artists.

The family came to the United States in 1793, initially working as itinerant artists in New England. It is not known what prompted their move to the States. The trip was notable because the boat was captured by a French privateer and the passengers were taken prisoner and held in Brest. Ellen would have been taking care not only of her two young children but also her husband's son Felix who was only a few years older. Once in New England, they traveled in a large coach designed by James, drawn by a white horse, doing portraits in pastel.

Ellen noted in her diary, “I had frequently thought that every well educated female, particularly those who has only small fortunes, should at least have the power, (even if they did not exercise it,) by the cultivation of some available talent, of obtaining the conveniences and some of the elegances of life and be enabled always to preserve that respectable position in society to which they had been accustomed...The continual fluctuation of the funds and other property in which our money had been invested, the uncertainty in mechanical pursuits in which Mr. S. delighted – all had an influence in deciding me, soon after our arrival in Philadelphia where Congress then assembled, to make my drawing which had been learnt and practiced as an ornamental art for amusement, available to a useful purpose. Mr. S. was generally engaged drawing in crayons the portraits of the most distinguished Americans, foreign Ministers and other distinguished visitants from Europe. Copies were frequently required; these I undertook and was so far successful as to have as many commissions as I could execute; they were thought equal to the originals, price the same: we lived in good style associating in the first society.”<sup>2</sup>

And so Ellen began copying her husband's small format pastel portraits and also to produce her own. They settled in Philadelphia where their portraits of notables, including George and Martha Washington, Alexander Hamilton, Lafayette, and James Madison, were in great demand. James

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<sup>1</sup> Knox, Katharine McCook, *The Sharples: Their Portraits of George Washington and His Contemporaries*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1930, p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, p. 13



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apparently did life portrait of George and Martha, and Ellen is presumed by Knox to have sat in on the sessions, possibly doing watercolors. At least six of the many pastel copies of George Washington have been attributed to Ellen. She also did skilled needlework, including a silk embroidery portrait of Washington, c. 1796 (now at Mount Vernon), based on the pastel portraits.