Mary Carpenter
Date
1779
Primary Maker
Ralph Earl
Medium
oil on canvas
Description
This is a full-length portrait of a seated girl who is turned slightly to the left. Her arms, neck, and face are painted in light pinks, with darker pink on her cheeks, chin, and knuckles. Earl uses gray to define shadows in her flesh tones and to delineate the veins in her right hand. Her head, adorned with a white plume, tips gently to the left, and her grayish-blue eyes look directly at the viewer. Her brown hair is brushed back from her forehead and falls in curls onto her shoulders. She wears a white dress with a sheen that suggests satin. The neckline of her dress turns squarely at her shoulders and crosses her chest in a shallow arc that is decorated by three rows of pleated fabric. The bodice features a triangular panel that is outlined by pleats and is decorated with vertical stripes that appear to border stays. Horizontal creases at the girl’s sides suggest that the dress is laced in back over an undergarment structured with bones to promote upright posture.1

The bodice is crossed by a white sash that drapes from her right shoulder to her waist at her left side, where it passes through a loop. This sash is richly ornamented with fabric representing green leaves and tiny pink flowers. The sleeves end just below the girl’s elbows in a six-inch ruffled band that is similarly decorated with leaves and flowers. The sleeves are completed by a striped white apron over a skirt patterned with Xs. The skirt billows widely. It and the apron are edged in front with pleated fabric, suggesting that the dress was once covered by an overdress.2 The chair Mary Ann Carpenter sits on has green upholstery and is edged with brass tacks. Earl used the same green to convey the fringed cloth that is draped over the table on the left side of the painting. The girl rests her right elbow on the table, and she leans a bit in that direction. Her right forearm turns back toward her lap, where her wrist bends softly and her hand clasps several flower stems: a large, circular purple flower with a yellow center, three tiny red blossoms with pointy petals and leaves, and another small purple flower. The girl’s middle three fingers hold this bouquet, while her little finger lifts away from the others. Although Earl’s drawing is a bit awkward, this gesture appears intended to convey the child’s refinement. Mary Ann has a leather-bound book in her left hand. Her thumb is pressed on the back cover, and her index finger holds it slightly open. The book has six panels defined by gilt ribs on the binding, the second of which is a red title panel. Although the title is illegible, the flowers suggest that the volume may be about nature. The walls behind her are defined in the same olive tones that Earl used in William Carpenter; they also demarcate a corner with a light surface to the left and a dark one that moderates to an intermediate tone to the right. A red curtain trimmed with yellow fringe fills much of the right side of the painting behind the sitter. The floor, visible only at the lower-left, is decorated with a patterned carpet that builds concentrically around a cross motif in two shades of brown, red, yellow, and two blues on a light-brown ground.

Dimensions
canvas: 121.9 x 88.9 cm (48 x 35 in.)