

THE WAY SISTERS: NEW LONDON PORTRAIT PAINTERS OF THE EARLY REPUBLIC

New London, Connecticut sisters Mary Way (1769–1833) and Elizabeth (Betsey) Way Champlain (1771–1825) were among the earliest professional women artists in the United States. Working between about 1789 and 1825, they started their careers by producing unique paper portraits “dressed” with fabric clothing that were unlike anything else being produced in America at this time.

In the 18th and early 19th centuries, young women were educated in the domestic arts to prepare them for running a household. Girls were taught practical and decorative sewing skills by family members or local instructors, and families with enough money sent their older daughters to secondary schools to learn drawing, painting, and music, in addition to more advanced needlework, reading, and writing.

While the details of Mary and Betsey Way’s education is unknown, the sisters likely attended a secondary school where they acquired skills in sewing, needlework, and drawing, which they continued to practice, hone, and adapt to create their unique dressed miniature portraits.

As women artists in early America, the Way sisters faced many challenges. Social expectations for women and family roles hindered their careers as portrait painters. They could not easily travel in search of patrons as male itinerant portraitists did. Because of her obligations to care for her husband and children, Betsey never left the region around New London, Connecticut, despite requests from potential patrons to do so.

Women often earned less money than their male counterparts, although regional differences and training were part of this equation. Suburban and rural regions had fewer teachers and fewer patrons seeking portraits than larger cities. Women also had less opportunity for advanced instruction, as male students were given preference and could more easily travel for their training. Art made by women was also not valued as highly as art by men, regardless of quality. While a well-respected male artist in New York could ask \$40 or even \$50 for a watercolor-on-ivory portrait in the 1810s, Mary Way charged around \$8 for an ivory portrait in New York, and Betsey received around \$5 for one in New London.

Yet despite challenges, the Way sisters took pride in their work and their successes, encouraging one another and drawing strength from their friendships and community ties.