

## **Activity: Observe and Interpret**

*Artists make choices in communicating ideas. What information can we learn about Elizabeth Watson and life in the British colonies in 1765 from this painting? What clues does Copley give us? Observing details and analyzing components of the painting, then putting them in historical context, enables the viewer to interpret the overall message of the work of art.*

### **Observation: What do you see?**



**Describe Mrs. Watson’s body language. How does the artist present her to the viewer?**

Standing straight, with a hand on her hip, Copley gives us a three-quarter length portrait of a woman who appears confident. Her body is turned slightly to the side, yet her face is turned towards us. Rather than looking off into the distance, she meets our gaze directly. Her forthright expression and set mouth seem to give us an impression of a person who is practical and sensible. Despite her wealth, she does not appear frivolous.

**Mrs. Watson holds something very particular in her hand. What does it mean?**

The exotic parrot tulip was not a flower that was native to the Colonies. The worldwide “tulip craze” drove the price of bulbs imported from Holland up to exorbitant costs. The small purple fritillaria flowers, once known for their medicinal qualities, multiply easily in the garden year after year. Together, these spring blooms tell us that Mrs. Watson keeps a cultivated garden for floral cuttings, a mark of sophistication. The shape of the imported vase echoes her own silhouette, and the delicate yet robust nature of the flowers refer to Mrs. Watson’s femininity, strength, and wealth.





### **What does her attire tell us about her age, social class and economic status?**

Elizabeth Watson wears a vibrant red silk sack back dress, a fashionable style from Europe in the 18th century. Bright colors were common among younger women; Elizabeth Watson was 26 years old in this portrait. Pearl-encrusted clips hold back her sleeves at the elbow, exposing the intricate lace detailing of her chemise (linen under-dress). Lace was expensive and imported, usually from Belgium or France, and was attached to the chemise as a cuff. The degree of detail in the lace and the number of layers would increase with social status. These details, combined with the extra length of white silk fabric that falls from the table and gathers in her right hand, indicate her status as the wife of a wealthy merchant and importer of fine European goods.

### **Interpretation: What does it mean?**

The wife of a wealthy Boston merchant, Elizabeth Watson wears a fashionably gown of luscious satin and white lace and holds a porcelain vase that echoes the contours of her figure. The yards of expensive fabric and silk ribbons in the costume testified to George Watson's success as an importer of European goods, as did the fact that he could afford to commission a portrait from Boston's foremost painter, John Singleton Copley. Mrs. Watson showed herself to colonial society as a fashionable English matron, but her direct gaze suggests the grit and character of a new American society that would emerge within ten years.



[Mrs. George Watson](#), 1765, John Singleton Copley, oil on canvas, Smithsonian American Art Museum