

**Fig. 1:** Waxwork sconce, unidentified schoolgirl, Boston, circa 1720–1740. Wax and mixed media. H. 24¼, W. 18⅝, D. 4¾ in. Courtesy of a private collection. Photography by Tom Bamberger, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

**Fig. 2 (right):** View of Boston, John Smibert, (1688–1751), 1738. Oil on canvas. 30 x 50 inches. Photography courtesy Childs Gallery, Boston, MA.





*Boston Waxworks from the early 18th Century* by Anne H. Vogel

# fancy figures

**W**ax materials have been used by sculptors, goldsmiths, and artists since ancient times. In the eighteenth century they became especially popular again with both professionals and amateurs. In England and her American colonies life-sized historical personages in full dress were created in wax for grand public displays.<sup>1</sup> Professionals also crafted intricate wax portraits and religious tableaux.<sup>2</sup> Among amateurs in the colonies, narrative scenes of figures in elaborate garden settings were made by privileged young girls as evidence of their education, moral character, and family status. To this date, no comparable work in England has been located, either because of the perishable nature of the material, or because it was an indigenous narrative genre taught in the colonies as a variation of the more formal English work in wax.

Only eight waxworks are known to exist from early colonial times.<sup>3</sup> Made almost entirely of beeswax, they are remarkable for having survived intact for three centuries and for what they reveal about colonial social conventions, gender roles, and how colonial identity was passed from one generation to the next.

Research indicates that all eight known waxworks, here identified as a group for the first time, were produced circa 1720–1740 by school-

girls in Boston, Massachusetts. Waxworks have been dated through estate inventories as well as documented examples, and newspaper advertisements from Boston finishing schools confirm the making of waxworks as part of their curricula. The works even share enough formal and stylistic elements to suggest the same teacher or school, with most sharing allegorical themes with well-known paintings, mezzotints, and needlework of the period.

Six of the eight wax pieces are in shadow box form and were designed as formal lighting fixtures with sconce arms. Of these, three are vertical rectangles with doubled arched tops,<sup>4</sup> (two are illustrated as figures 1 and 7), similar to frames used for quillwork (filigree), another type of fancy schoolgirl work (Fig. 4). Three are large horizontal chimneypieces with attendant candle arms, or evidence thereof<sup>5</sup> (one illustrated in Figs. 8–9a). Two are not in the shadow box form but display three-dimensional seated figures, positioned on wooden turned stands with period glass domes (Fig. 5–6). These last two works are related to the genre of sculpture and were designed to be seen in the round.

Regardless of their form, this group of waxworks displays similar methods of construction and ornamentation. Waxwork at the schoolgirl

level was accomplished with the fingers or with simple tools of box-wood, bone, or ivory. A modeling board of slate or wood was used. Wax could be mixed with powdered colors and poured into molds, or hand worked from thin sheets.<sup>6</sup> Heads, arms, and hands were produced from molds as were smaller figures and animals. These pieces were then assembled into complex compositions.

Extraordinary skill and agility were required to carefully attach small wires to the wax figures, fruits, and flowers, then anchor those forms to wooden posts, cover the posts with green tape for camouflage, and hide those construction techniques with more wax decoration. The figures themselves may have been simple in form but their assembled compositions were complex, akin to an elaborate theater set or three-dimensional puzzle.

An incredible variety of materials make up a typical wax piece. The costumes, which are individualized, are made from thin sheets of wax, sometimes painted or with integral color, and embellished with period lace trim dipped in wax and then gilded. Bows, linen aprons, bonnets, and earrings are among the elaborate details that decorate the figures and their costumes. One figure even holds a tricorne hat, an attribute of eighteenth-century gentility. Green wax forced through sieves was used to create grass-like mounds with sea shells and fruits for accent. Red colored paper hand scored with white paint form brick garden walls. Silken threads simulate hair for the human figures and wool fibers suggests a lamb's coat. The shadow box to house this material also needed to be acquired as did the glass; several sconces were glazed with greenish bull's-eye Crown glass, strangely distorting the visual experience.

Although much is known about the materials that comprise these waxworks, we are only beginning to discover facts about the individuals who created them and the social setting in which they worked.

Boston was the leading colonial port city in the first quarter of the eighteenth century. Its cosmopolitanism stemmed from its close ties to London and its mercantile connections to far-away and exotic places. In 1719, commenting upon the city with its population of 20,000 and bustling port activity, a visiting minister from London noted, "A gentlemen from London would almost think himself at home at Boston when he observes the numbers of people, their houses, their furniture, their tables, and their dress...."<sup>7</sup> John Smibert's 1738 *View of Boston* (Fig. 2) gives credence to this praise. He paints a ship-filled harbor, with numerous church spires rising above Georgian brick houses, all of which echoed London's comforts and influence.

Privileged young girls between the ages of eight and sixteen from up and down the eastern coastline were sent to Boston for private schooling. The creation of fancy ornamental products was considered an essential component of female education, as important as reading, writing, math, music, and dancing. Adam and Eve samplers (Fig. 3), filigree sconces (Fig. 4), and waxwork, were the popular finishing tasks in the 1720s and 1730s. Needlework pictures as well as large pastoral chimneypieces of the fishing lady motif and embroidered coats of arms followed in the 1740s continuing through the 1760s. The practice of making embroidered coats of arms extended even into the 1790s. The educational benefits of this component of schooling were intended to prepare the young girls in their practice of religious and moral values, supervision of a household, and in attaining an advantageous marriage.

An unpublished study by scholar Peter Benes of estate inventories for the years 1705 to 1770 in Suffolk County, Massachusetts, cites waxworks were owned in Boston area homes as early as 1705 and through 1767. It suggests that approximately 5 percent of Boston's 4,000 households held waxwork items. Their value ranged widely, reaching as high as £32. For



**Fig. 3 (top):** Sampler with the initials aP, Boston, dated 1727. Silk on linen ground with a variety of stitches. H. 9, W. 8¾ in. (sight). Collection and photography courtesy of Glee and Ralph Krueger. These embroidered figures and creatures in the Garden of Eden setting relate to the time period and themes of the waxwork sconces and chimneypieces. **Fig. 4 (bottom):** Quillwork scone, unidentified schoolgirl, probably Boston, Mass., dated 1737. Pine, gilded and colored paper, wax, shells, fabric, wire, glass. Frame: H. 22¼, W. 18 7/8 in. Courtesy of Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. H. E. Bolles Fund. Photograph © 2005, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. The maker is probably a member of the Emerson family, through which the scone descended. The glazed central medallion contains a wax figure of Pan, a standing dog, and a goat in Arcadia. A wax fruit wreath and other wax figures complete the piece. Evidence remains of two wooden sockets for candle arms.





**Figs. 5, 6:** Wax figures, Sarah Gardner (Gee) (1709–after 1793), Boston circa 1720–1725. Wax and mixed media. Female figure: H. 23¼, D. 10½ in.; Male figure: H. 23¼, D. 10¼ in. Courtesy of Historic New England. Photography by Peter Harholdt.

this sixty-plus year period, the Benes study lists eleven “cases of wax work” and three “glasses” or “shadow glasses” containing waxwork located in either the “front room,” the “best room,” the “best chamber” or in the “chamber over the great room.” The two wax figures in glass domes (Figures 5 and 6) are recorded in Joshua Gee’s 1750 estate inventory, taken after his death in 1748, as “3 Shadow Glasses on Stools filled w/wax work £30.” Unfortunately, the whereabouts of the third is unknown.<sup>8</sup>

Unfortunately, few sources are available to identify the leading schools or teachers in Boston during the 1720s and through the 1730s, or to attach their names to individual waxwork projects. Information about teachers active in Boston from 1706–1771 reveals the most likely candidate associated with this group of waxworks as Mrs. Susanna Hiller Condy (1686–1747). Scholarship associates Condy’s teaching with the early Adam and Eve sampler patterns and with initiating Boston’s famous fishing lady pastoral embroidered pictures. It seems likely that she would also have offered fancy projects in waxwork dealing with the

Garden of Eden and other pastoral themes, although the pressure of competition did not prompt her to advertise until a later date.<sup>9</sup>

Born in Boston of English parents, it is thought Condy’s services were available from the 1720s until her death. Her advertisements (first appearing in 1738) indicated she was in touch with English goods and fashions, and that she offered her own patterns at a cheaper rate than those that came from London. Charges from Susanna Condy in the 1740s account books of Boston silversmith Rufus Greene, for his daughter, Katherine (whose nickname was Catys), indicate Condy taught fancy work at costly values. One entry states “Dec. 10, 1746 Cash paid for my daughter Catys pair of Sconces to Madam Condy, £39.” Unfortunately, this entry does not reveal whether the sconces were embroidery, filigree, or waxwork.<sup>10</sup> Upon Condy’s death, her daughter, Elizabeth Russel, advertised the sale of Susanna’s “drawn” patterns, which allowed her designs to be used by others.

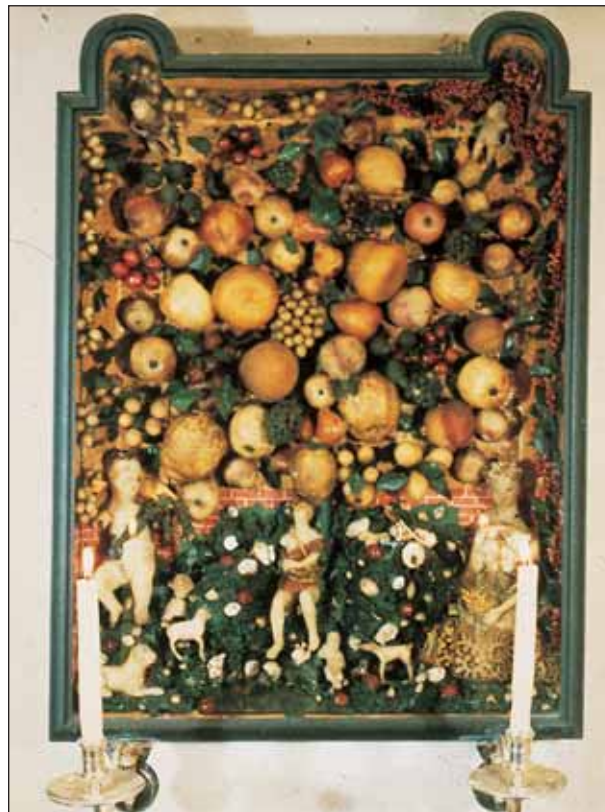
In 1748, Condy’s daughter-in-law, Abigail Stevens Hiller, continued



the schooling legacy when she placed a formal announcement in the Boston Evening Post notifying the public about lessons for “young Gentlemen” in “...Wax Work, Transparent and Filligree, Painting upon Glass, Japanning, Quill-Work, Feather-Work, and Embroidering with Gold and Silver, ... and several other sorts of Work not here enumerated...”<sup>11</sup> Hiller is the first in the Boston area to name waxwork as part of the curriculum, and probably continued much of Susanna Condry’s teaching format. Earlier advertisements mentioning waxwork do exist. A 1731 notice in New York announced that Martha Gazley, “late of Great Britain,” was offering instruction to the young ladies in the city of New York, on how to make “the following curious Works, viz. Artificial Fruit and Flowers and other Wax-Work, Nuns-Work, Philligree and Pencil Work upon Muslin... and also to Paint on Glass, and Transparent for Sconces.”<sup>12</sup> Given Benes’s details of the estate inventories of the period, it can be presumed that

similar instruction in wax was available in Boston earlier but simply not advertised nor included in the listing of skill sets.

Whether or not the schoolmistress was Susanna Condry, the eight waxworks have enough common stylistic elements and shared allegorical themes to suggest they emanated from the same school or teacher. All the chimneypieces and vertical sconces have fruit trees and grassy mounds sprinkled with seashells, frolicking lambs, dogs or deer, and a variety of other creatures and diverse botanical references. The two sculptural figures under glass are also seated upon these ubiquitous grassy mounds with sheep at their feet and fruit trees behind them. The three chimneypieces make reference to Adam and Eve and have a cast of figures in stylish period dress within the Garden of Eden; the vertical sconces provide the popular eighteenth-century ideal of fashionably clothed female figures posing as shepherdesses in a pastoral landscape,



**Fig. 1a (top left):** Detail figure 1, showing the costume of the female figure as shepherdess holding a lamb. Courtesy of a private collection. Photography by Graydon Wood. **Fig. 6a (top right):** Detail of figure 6, showing posterior costume detail of wax female figure, by Sarah Gardner (Gee). Photography courtesy of the author. **Fig. 7 (bottom):** Waxwork sconce, associated with Anna Cutler, Weston, Massachusetts, circa 1740. Wax and mixed media. H. 28¾, W. 32, D. 5 in. Courtesy of Golden Ball Tavern, Weston, MA., and appreciation to Linda Wiseman for providing visual examination.



combined with mythological figures and references that enhanced the bucolic imagery.

The two sculptural figures (Figs. 5–6) tie the group of eight waxworks to a specific time and place because their maker is identified. Sarah Gardner (1709–1793) was born and raised in Boston, and married the prominent Reverend Joshua Gee, pastor of Boston's Second Church, the Old North Church, in 1740. Although her teacher is unknown, it is likely that Sarah produced these waxes at a finishing school in Boston, possibly Mrs. Condy's, when she was between ten and fifteen years of age (circa 1719–1724). After her marriage to Reverend Gee, Sarah placed the wax figures in the best chamber of their home, providing testimony to the importance and role of waxworks.<sup>13</sup> Remarkably, these figures descended intact through Sarah's family until gifted to Historic New England in 1924 by her great-great-granddaughter.

One of the vertical waxworks, which remains at its original site in the Golden Ball Tavern in Weston, Massachusetts (Fig. 7), also yields valuable information as to its date and possible maker. The waxwork was recorded in Isaac Jones's 1813 estate inventory as "a box of wax work" listed in the master chamber at £20. A piece of newspaper under the skirts of one of the figures was identified by the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale as from the *London Daily Advertiser* of December 9, 1740. The waxwork is thought to have been made by Jones's first wife, Anna Cutler, when a young woman, whom he later married in 1753.<sup>14</sup>

The Golden Ball Tavern wax scone is very similar to the private collection example (Fig. 1) both in construction, its double-arched shadow box form, and thematic motif. When compared to the two glass covered figures and the others in the group, it is evident they all share a number of characteristics. The most apparent connection is the close attention to costume detailing and dress styling from the period. Compare the female figure in the private collection scone and the figures in the round. The general configuration of the gowns, with carefully pleated skirting, lace trim to the bodice, hem and the linen cuffs at the sleeves are similar (Fig. 1a). The male seated solitary figure (Fig. 5) also has the same type of lace ornamenting his long jacket, shirt, and linen cuffs. The jackets and petticoat style of dress of the two female figures are tight at the waists with the lace detail emphasizing the conical shape of the bodice. Below the waist, both jackets are lobed shaped, again with lace edging (Fig. 6a) which is comparable in cut to the costume in an English portrait dated 1718–1720.<sup>15</sup>

In the three chimneypieces, Adam and Eve share the Garden of

**Fig. 8 (top):** Right panel of a waxwork chimneypiece, unidentified school-girl(s), circa 1720–1740, showing Adam and two other figures. The makers are suggested by family history to be the daughters of William Samuel Johnson, at school in Boston during pre-revolutionary days. Makers are now ascribed to an earlier generation of that family and placed by the author of this article into the group of eight waxworks by reason of thematic and stylistic similarities. H.22¼, W. 63, D. 5½. Courtesy of New Haven Colony Historical Society. **Fig. 9 (bottom):** Left panel of figure 8 showing the figure of Eve with the Virgin Mary's attribute of a book in hand. Courtesy of New Haven Colony Historical Society.





Eden with contemporary Bostonians in their latest London fashions; perhaps wealthy Boston families liked to think of themselves as living in an earthly paradise. In the New Haven Colony Historical Society example (Figs. 8–9a) the Adam and Eve figures are clothed with small half-aprons, revealing their newfound knowledge of good and evil. Or it may be a reference to the European view of the savages of the “New World” who dressed themselves with skins supplied by God. The aprons appear to resemble leather embellished with an English style of lace trim for Eve and painted fringe trim for Adam. Comparable aprons appear on American Indian figures depicted on maps of early New England and later on the Great Seal of Massachusetts.

The six shadow box vignettes symbolize the many implications of the “*hortus conclusus*,” or enclosed garden. In Biblical terms, this garden type symbolized the purity of the Virgin Mary. In England, the cloistered garden was also intended for the encyclopedic collecting of live plant material as well as for spaces of courtly leisure. The colonial wax gardens, interestingly, all feature red brick garden walls in their compositions. Even Sarah Gardner’s sculptural figures in their small setting have fruit trees and green grass to suggest an idyllic garden, in this instance bounded by glass. It is fitting that the walled gardens that provide the background for these figures are filled with a variety of fruit-bearing trees and vines framing the interior top and sides of the shadow boxes. That the material is beeswax and that the bees are the pollinators of all fruits, flowers, and healthy gardens only enhances this beguiling symbolism.

Cupid and Psyche also appear within the walled gardens of the three vertical waxworks. Cupid and Psyche’s eternal message of love would be an alluring subject for schoolgirl work, and would appeal to teachers who wanted to enhance their student’s literacy in classical symbolism. Psyche is presented as a reclining nude with flowing red drapery and Cupid as a large putti with bow and arrow and golden wings edged in red (Fig. 1b). Their representation is preserved best in the private collection scone.<sup>16</sup> In each of the six shadow boxes, additional putti inhabit the upper corners of the garden scenes (Fig. 1c). A probable



source for these figures is Anthony Van Dyck’s (1599–1641) painting of Cupid and Psyche (circa 1638–1640) for Charles I, which remains in the Royal Collection. This popular painting was made into a print by Bernard Lens II (1659–1725) in London.<sup>17</sup> While the date of the mezzotint is unknown, it could have been circulated in the colonies by the early eighteenth century, particularly in Boston with its close ties to London. Prints were a major design source for the composition of these schoolgirl products. Many were copied in a rather free manner from patterns without much attention to the original source.

In addition to classical imagery, motifs from classical literature were recurring themes in schoolgirl waxworks. Virgil’s *Bucolics*, (37 B.C.) pastoral poems modeled on the Idylls of Theocritus (310–250 B.C.), gave significance to the meaning of a simple rural life of leisure that became a conscious attribute to symbolize life among the elite in early eighteenth-century Boston. The three vertical sconces (see Figs. 1, 7) depict this common theme with a fashionably dressed shepherdess at leisure within a garden landscape. By choosing a shepherdess, the students created an idealized vision of their privileged life. It is sug-

gested that for daughters of upper class families, such images, omitting any reference to the tiring labors of rural work or urban industry, was fundamental to their social identity and aristocratic status. Pastoral scenes also portrayed a developing understanding of the feminine ideal and the prescribed role of young women that developed in the eighteenth century.<sup>18</sup>


The pastoral imagery of young ladies masquerading as shepherdesses links these waxworks to the portraiture of the era. John Singleton Copley’s paintings of Ann Tyng (circa 1756) and Elizabeth Gray Otis (circa 1764), the daughters of two wealthy Boston merchants, depict each with a shepherd’s crook in her hand. Copley’s subjects, dressed in the latest fashions from England and situated in idealized landscapes borrowed from English mezzotints, project similar concepts of femininity and social status to that revealed in the earlier waxwork compositions.

This group of schoolgirl waxworks, and the related needlework of the period, functioned as a barometer of self image within Boston society. The themes, costumes, and settings in these wax-

**Fig. 1b** (above): Detail of figure 1, showing wax renditions of Cupid and Psyche. Courtesy of a private collection. Photography by Graydon Wood. **Fig. 1c** (upper right): Detail of figure 1, showing putti in upper right corner. **Fig. 9a** (in notes): Detail of figure 9 showing the book in Eve’s hand as Psalm 103 and 23: “Bles the Lord/ O my soul and / all that is / within me bles/ be within me/ Bles his holy name/ \_forget not / all his benefits /The Lord is my / shepherd I shall / not want he/ lead me beside / the still waters / The Lord of \_/ \_Jesus.” The study and singing of psalms in early 18th century was an essential part of a “gentlewomen’s” education. Courtesy of New Haven Colony Historical Society.

works, which became important heirlooms, portrayed and reinforced family wealth, character, and education. However, the meaning of these pieces was not limited to family status. The symbolism of fashionably dressed figures in a bountiful New World garden was tempered by the moral lessons of Biblical references and a *vanitas* theme evoked by their fragile material and the flickering light from their candle arms. Because these waxworks were made of beeswax, the same material used in the candles that illuminated them, the pieces evoke suggestions of mortality and the ephemeral quality of nature's bounty; ideas that were equally important in shaping colonial identity and religious thought. All of these themes found clear expression in these fragile and evocative waxworks



created by schoolgirls in Boston in the early eighteenth century. 

*I am indebted to the following curators for their assistance with this article, visual examinations and/or bringing waxworks to my attention: Dean Lahikainen, Edward Maeder, Amy Trout, Nancy Carlisle, Paula Richter, and Gerald W. R. Ward.*

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1 Sponsors of these public viewings of life-size wax historic figures were frequently advertised in Boston newspapers, beginning as early as 1733 and continuing through the end of the century. George Francis Dow, comp., *The Arts and Crafts in New England 1704–1775: Gleanings From Boston Newspapers* (Topsfield, Mass: The Wayside Press, 1927; reprint, New York: Da Capo Press, 1967), introduction; *Boston News-Letter* (November 27/December 6, 1733): 287–90; *Boston Evening Post* (February 15, 1748). Also includes later advertising by other teachers offering lessons in waxwork.

2 R. Campbell, *The London Tradesman*, (London, 1747; reprint, London: David & Charles, 1969), p. 140, includes “Wax Figure Maker,” in the names of the trades practiced and comments upon the taste for adorning London apartments with wax busts.

3 The eight include three wooden vertical shadow boxes at the Golden Ball Tavern, Weston, MA; Historic Deerfield, Deerfield, MA; Private collection. Three horizontal chimney-piece shadow boxes, five to six feet in width: New Haven Colony Historical Society, New Haven, CT; Historic New England, Boston, MA; and Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, MA. Two individual figures (Male and Female) at Historic New England, Boston, MA.

4 For illustrations of the Historic Deerfield scone, which has been altered over centuries of ownership, see *The Magazine, Antiques* 82, no.4 (October 1962): 411.

5 Only the example from the New Haven Colony Historical Society is illustrated. The other two are in conservation.

6 D.R. Reilly, *Portrait Waxes: An Introduction for Collectors*, (London: B.T. Batsford, 1953), pp. 3-7; Thelma R. Newman, *Wax as Art Form*, (South Brunswick, N. J. Thomas Yoseloff, 1966) pp. 19–20, 99–106; Nancy Carlisle, *Cherished Possessions: A New England Legacy* (Boston: SPNEA, 2003), cat. 33, pp.116–19. Decorating with wax continued into the 19th century. See: *Wax Flowers: How to Make Them with New methods of Sheet Wax, Modelling Fruit, & c.* (Boston: J. E. Tilton and Company, 1864); and *Gifts in Honor of the 125th Anniversary of the Philadelphia Museum of Art* (2002), p.62 for a wax fruit arrangement and a flower-making kit.

7 Quoted in Wayne Craven, *Colonial American Portraiture*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 139.

8 Unpublished documents cited in Peter Benes, “‘1 Image of the Virgin Mary’: Religious, Decorative, and Carnavalesque Objects inventoried in Eighteenth-Century Boston Households,” (MS dated 10

October 2003). This study was based on an examination of household inventories in Suffolk County, Massachusetts, 1653–1770, by Jane Montague Benes in 1997.

9 Glee Krueger, *New England Samplers to 1840* (Sturbridge, Mass: Old Sturbridge Village, 1978), pp. 156–160; Betty Ring, *Girlhood Embroidery: American Samplers & Pictorial Needlework 1650–1850*, 2 vols (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), Vol. 1, pp. 36–45.

10 Ring, *Girlhood Embroidery*, vol. 1, pp. 51–52.

11 George Francis Dow, comp., *The Arts and Crafts in New England 1704–1775: Gleanings From Boston Newspapers* (Topsfield, Mass: The Wayside Press, 1927; reprint, New York: Da Capo Press, 1967) p. 288, *Boston Evening Post* (Feb.15, 1748).

12 Mabel Stivers, “Wax Figures in Old Museums,” *Old-Time New England* 17, 1 (July 1926):42–43; *Elisabeth Anthony Dexter, Colonial Woman of Affairs: A Study of Women in Business and Professions in America before 1776* (Boston, Houghton Mifflin Co., 1924) pp. 92–93.

13 Carlisle, *Cherished Possessions* pp.116–119.

14 Howard Gambrell, Jr., and Charles Hambrick-Stowe, *Tory: The Story of the Golden Ball Tavern* (Weston, Mass.: Golden Ball Tavern, 1977, reprint August, 1988), p. 4, 48–51.

15 C.W. and P. Cumington, *Handbook of English Costume in the 18th Century* (Boston: Plays, Inc., 1972), fig. 40. My appreciation to Kristina Haugland, Assistant Curator of Costume and Textiles, Philadelphia Museum of Art, for analyzing the dress styles of all the figures in this group of eight waxworks, and the portrait source.

16 In the Golden Ball Tavern scone, the recumbent female figure is set upright. This was done during conservation in order to relate to a presumed embroidered fishing lady composition connection. A historic photograph, however, pictures the figure in recline. Furthermore, her eyes are painted closed as if resting. Correspondence in a letter from Howard Gambrell, Jr., to Frederick Vogel III (February 26, 1974), Vogel Collection files.

17 James A. Ganz, *Fancy Pieces: Genre Mezzotints by Robert Robinson and His Contemporaries* (New Haven: Yale Center for British Art, 1994/5), pp. 34–35.

18 Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *Age of Homespun* (New York, Knopf, 2001), and Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (London: The Women's Press, 1984).

