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Redefining the British Decorative Arts

Edited by Iris Moon



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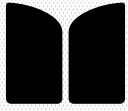
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New Femininity? Josiah Wedgwood's Portrait Medallions of Sarah Siddons “Femmes Célèbres”

Patricia F. Ferguson

Abstract

In 1788, the potter Josiah Wedgwood introduced a radical new sub-section under the banner of his popular *Heads of Illustrious Moderns, from Chaucer to the Present Time* focused on historical and contemporary women, rather than men, and entitled “Femmes Célèbres”. In its creation, Wedgwood celebrated the lives and achievements of twenty-eight elite, white women of immense privilege and beauty, but also objectified and commodified them for his financial gain. Within this group of aristocrats, mistresses, poets, queens, and educationalists were several female worthies, inspirational women, who possessed qualities he clearly admired—independence, intelligence, and industry. The outsider was the actress and first modern female celebrity, Sarah Siddons, whose struggles to gain acceptance by overcoming gendered obstacles paralleled those of elite, educated, literary women in their desire for recognition. Wedgwood’s gallery of female heads may have served as a visual conduct book or manual, presenting a modern vision of female agency, a new femininity that circumvented and navigated conventions of politeness and the status quo. When accompanied by enlightened conversations, even gossip, among women around the tea-table or while shopping with friends, the life choices of the sitters depicted in these portrait medallions served to educate and promote what it meant to be a woman in the late eighteenth century. This article redefines the reception of this group of ornamental portrait medallions in Wedgwood’s new stoneware bodies as decorative art objects inspired by fine art representations and made accessible through mass production.

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Introduction

The stage actress Sarah Siddons (née Kemble, 1755–1831) was the subject of almost four hundred portraits produced in her lifetime, from paintings by aspiring society artists to anonymous satirical broadsides, and from plaster busts to printed fabric (figs. 1 and 2).¹ A performer critically aware of her self-image, she built her audience on a reputation that brought an unprecedented dignity and decorum to what was then considered a morally suspect profession. Such was her fame that the potter Josiah Wedgwood produced two different bas-relief ceramic portrait medallions of the actress, one in her public role as the “Tragedy Queen” and another capturing her private persona as a lady of fashion. One of these was included among Wedgwood’s novel assemblage of seven portrait medallions of contemporary British women, listed under *Illustrious Moderns* in his 1787 ornamental catalogue as a new category, “Ladies”, later expanded in the French-language edition in 1788 as “Femmes Célèbres”, with an additional five female portraits. This article examines these two portrait medallions of “Mrs. Siddons”, available in black basaltes and jasper ware (figs. 3 and 4). It will investigate the sources for their designs and possible authorship, while situating the actress, often identified as being at the forefront of modern celebrity culture, alongside more privileged sitters that included royalty, aristocrats, poets, and educationalists, in order to understand how Wedgwood’s new category assisted in amplifying the increasingly public roles and contributions to British society of women in the late eighteenth century. This narrowly focused methodology, which considers Wedgwood’s portrait medallions both collectively and individually, redefines their intention and reception, building on the traditional histories associated with taste, style, and patronage.²



Figure 1.
William Hamilton, Mrs. Siddons as Euphrasia in *The Grecian Daughter*, 1784, oil on canvas, 270 × 155 cm.
Collection of Stratford-upon-Avon Town Hall (TH14).
Digital image courtesy of Stratford-upon-Avon Town Hall (all rights reserved).



Figure 2.

After John Keyse Sherwin, Mrs. Siddons in *The Grecian Daughter*, 15 December 1782, etching and engraving with stipple, 25 × 21.1 cm. Collection of The British Museum (1931,0509.169). Digital image courtesy of The Trustees of the British Museum, London (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).



Figure 3.

Attributed to John Flaxman Jnr, Josiah Wedgwood & Sons manufacturers, Portrait Medallion of Sarah Siddons as Euphrosia, circa 1795, stoneware (black basalt) impressed legend 'Mrs. Siddons' and verso 'Wedgwood' , 15.2 cm. Collection of the Art Fund, Incirca at the Birmingham Museum of Art, The Buten Wedgwood Collection, gift through the Wedgwood Society of New York (AFI.796.2012). Digital image courtesy of Birmingham Museum of Art, Alabama (all rights reserved).



Figure 4.

Attributed to John Flaxman Jnr, Josiah Wedgwood & Sons manufacturers, Portrait Medallion of Sarah Siddons as Euphrasia, circa 1785-1800, stoneware (jasper ware), white on solid blue-coloured ground with brass frame, verso impressed 'Wedgwood', 13.33 cm. Collection of the Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington, DC., Craven Collection (C206, Art 241064). Digital image courtesy of Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington, DC. (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

The Materiality of Celebrity

Over seventeen hundred portrait cameos and medallions were published by Wedgwood and his business partner, Thomas Bentley (1731-1780), in the final eighteenth-century edition of *Catalogue of cameos, intaglios, medals, bas-reliefs, busts and small statues, ... The whole formed in different kinds of Porcelain and Terra Cotta, chiefly after the antique, and the finest models of modern artists* (1788).³ The majority of these portraits were after antique gems, with subjects from classical mythology and Greco-Roman personalities. Portraits of celebrated modern personalities represented only a

small minority: 268 sitters were recorded by 1788. The earliest of these were made in monochrome black stoneware, known as Basaltes, with a lustrous bronze-like finish to imitate medals, or a “white waxen biscuit”, painted in enamels with a contrasting background to resemble hardstone cameos.⁴ From 1776, the latter was replaced with a revolutionary new material, jasper ware, also a stoneware, tinted with different coloured oxides to produce blue, green, yellow, grey, and lilac.⁵ Bas-relief heads in white stoneware were applied to a coloured medallion and fired, creating crisply edged, two-colour portraits. A final improvement, from 23 November 1777, involved washing or dipping the white medallion backgrounds in a fine slip coloured with cobalt or another pigment. As cobalt was expensive this reduced production costs substantially.

The design process for these mass-produced portrait medallions began with Wedgwood identifying a sitter and having a modeller submit a drawing taken from life, a painted miniature, an engraving, or another source. The drawing was used to prepare a wax model, either by an independent modeller or one employed at the manufactory, such as William Hackwood (circa 1757–1839). The wax model was used to make a plaster mould in intaglio from which a bas-relief or cameo master or block mould was made and used to produce working intaglio moulds for the final products. Independent wax modellers, such as John Charles Lochée (circa 1751–1791), often retained the wax original to sell to clients, sending only a plaster intaglio mould. The finished ceramic portrait medallions or “heads” were made in various sizes, from less than one inch to about six inches. They were usually single sided, with plain backs for flat storage in drawers, or with self-frames designed for suspending on a wall; they were also framed in traditional metal or wooden frames, and smaller portrait medallions could be mounted in jewellery. The manufactory encouraged private commissions, priced at a dozen or more examples, which the patron could give away to a small circle of friends and family. Many of the modern women depicted in Wedgwood portrait medallions were private orders.

Illustrious Moderns: The Patriarchy

Wedgwood and Bentley’s medallions capitalised on the fashion among British aristocrats and educated elites for forming large cabinets of antique engraved gemstones, cameos, and intaglios, as well as Renaissance and later cast or struck bronze portrait medals inspired by ancient Roman coinage.⁶ In the eighteenth century, collecting engraved and sculpted “heads” or busts in profile to commemorate or celebrate human achievements, as an *exemplum virtutis* (persons who serve as models of virtue and worthy of imitation), was a male-dominated activity, although there were rare exceptions.⁷ This masculine sociability centred on cabinets

housed in libraries that created sites where ideas and opinions were exchanged about the authenticity of the likeness, the quality of the carving or cast, and the achievements of the sitter, and, more broadly, on gendered norms of masculinity. Historic cameos and medals were an educational tool of the wealthy, learned, and powerful, and almost exclusively male.

Wedgwood's modern imitations and "instant" collections offered a similar experience to aspirational members of lower ranks of society. One of the sections of the catalogue of which Wedgwood was most proud was *Class X, Heads of Illustrious Moderns, from Chaucer to the present Time*, a miscellany of portraits copied from a variety of sources beyond the glyptic and medallic arts, such as ivory, engravings, and wax portraiture. While some other classes, such as "Kings of England" after Dassier and "Heads of the Popes", were sold as complete sets of uniform size and material as "Cabinets of Heads" for display in narrow drawers in wooden cabinets (to "make a pretty drawer in the Cabinet"), the *Illustrious Moderns* were not considered a set but more of a gallery, and were sold individually.⁸ Wedgwood's chief competitor in the field of affordable, cameo-style contemporary portraiture, from whom he purchased casts or intaglio moulds for ceramic production, was the Scotsman James Tassie (1735–1799). A wax modeller and gem engraver, Tassie specialised in portraits produced in a vitreous paste he called "enamel"—a very fusible glass, of essentially lead potash—and sulphurs, mixed with red ochre. Tassie published his own catalogues in 1775 and 1791, which also included Worthies of the modern period; however, no non-royal, contemporary women were listed in the earlier volume.

Wedgwood's selection for his *Illustrious Moderns* was clearly based on military achievements, literary or scientific advances, and the political importance of the sitters, ennobled in clay for posterity; the vast majority were depictions of men. Women were all but absent from the forty-six *Illustrious Moderns* listed in the first catalogue, published in 1773: the one exception was "Mrs. Dacier", a French classical scholar renowned for her translation of Homer's *Iliad* (1711) and *Odyssey* (1716), as well as the poems of Sappho (1681).⁹ Anne Dacier (née Lefèvre, 1647–1720) was taught Ancient Greek and Latin—an educational privilege generally restricted to men—by her father, a professor of classics, and achieved scholarly attention before her marriage in 1684; Dacier was an exemplar of the empowerment of the educated woman. Yet, in *Biographium Faemineum. The female worthies: or, memoirs of the most illustrious ladies of all ages and nations* (1766), it is her virtuous modesty that was praised above her intellect.¹⁰

A New Femininity

Wedgwood's decision to include Dacier, a celebrated translator of ancient texts, among his *Illustrious Moderns* pointed to the growing recognition of women as public figures, no longer bound to the domestic sphere alone. The position of educated and elite women in society was evolving in the eighteenth century. The economy had improved the quality of life for women of the gentry class, who had more leisure time for shopping, writing, and reading. Improvements in postal services—two to three letters could be exchanged per day—encouraged literary skills, and the publication of novels catered to the market for middle-class women readers. Biographies of historical and public personalities and their private lives thrived through the rapid distribution of books, broadsides, and pamphlets—for example, William Alexander's *History of Women, from the earliest antiquity to the present time* (1779)—and many were illustrated with portraits. The study of these historical women encouraged the transformative potential of literacy and strengthened the need for female education.

A campaigner for social reform, Wedgwood, with several daughters of his own and a clever wife, Sarah (née Wedgwood, 1734–1815), was conscious of the absence of formal female education. Following in the tradition of upper-class fathers teaching their daughters the classics and sciences, Wedgwood home-schooled his daughters; but he sent his sons away to school and later employed them in the family business to learn the trade. As a member of the Lunar Society Birmingham, an all-male dining club where industrialists and intellectuals met, the entrepreneur would have been aware of other members who encouraged the education of women, especially in the sciences: his partner, Bentley, even wrote a pamphlet entitled “The Improvement of Female Education”, promoting intellectual equality, though it was never published.¹¹ Many who supported women's intellectual aspirations and activities often did so, as a way of promoting equitable access to education for everyone. Bentley was not the only one thinking of moral reforms for women.

Both Bentley and Wedgwood were interested in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Emile, or on Education* (1762).¹² Rousseau's writings encouraged Wedgwood in his struggle against the slave trade; however, on female education the Frenchman thought young women should be educated only to serve men better in their limited roles as wives and mothers. In her conduct book, *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters: with Reflections on Female Conduct in the more important duties of life* (1787), the advocate for woman's rights Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–1797) argues against this passive female ideal, advocating that women could contribute more to society if they were brought up to display sound morals, character, and intellect, rather than superficial social graces. In light of these contemporary dialogues, Wedgwood's

“Femmes Célèbres” may have acted as an alternative visual conduct book or manual, presenting a new vision of female agency that navigated appropriate and inappropriate behaviour. When their portraits were studied alongside enlightened conversations, even gossip, these illustrious women presented alternative life choices through their characters and accomplishments.

Several of the sitters were associated with the Blue Stockings Society, an informal women’s social and educational movement active in the second half of the eighteenth century that invited men to participate in their conversations about science, art, and literature.¹³ Including aristocratic and middle-class women, the more outspoken Bluestockings challenged gender stereotypes and subjection to men in marriage, redefining and widening women’s social role. Their cultural and literary output promoted female accomplishments and emphasised the need for equality of the sexes, issues ultimately associated with modern feminism. Female supporters of these new ideas would have appreciated the merchandise associated with their idols; painted portrait miniatures on ivory or vellum were costly and typically only shared with close friends and family, while prints lacked the tactility and mobility of the sculptural ceramic portraits, which were easily slipped into a pocket or purse. Wedgwood’s portrait medallions were affordable, sometimes even cheaper than engraved portraits, and available to anyone with sufficient means or willing to make financial sacrifices.

The following study of the women Wedgwood included in his “Femmes Célèbres” asks, somewhat provocatively, if the potter had a “feminist” agenda. According to Jane Rendall, in the late eighteenth century “modern feminism” was not about equality in labour, nor was it an outright challenge to male power: it was about recognition of “moral and rational worth”.¹⁴ Many of the women in Wedgwood’s gallery of female Worthies claimed for themselves the right to define their own place in society as individuals. With the average middle-class woman having few virtuous female role models, Wedgwood offered an inspirational group of women—dedicated, hard-working, and self-educated—who had either virtuous characters or supported virtuous causes, and who had developed personas independent of their families, but at the same time were fiercely loyal to their friends and family. The majority were associated with the same elite and fashionable social circles, with the exception of the actress Sarah Siddons, who despite her considerable fame as a celebrity in Georgian England was an outsider because of her craft.

The Sisterhood of Celebrity

A gallery of women, past and present, who had participated in intellectual, cultural, and political spheres, was a timely idea when, in 1787, Wedgwood introduced a new sub-section entitled “Ladies”, under *Heads of Illustrious Moderns*, in his revised ornamental catalogue. The narrow term described only women of high social class or with positions of authority over domestic spheres, typically realised through marriage or inheritance. It evidently proved inadequate to introduce women celebrated for their achievements as writers, poets, and educators, as the following year, in the 1788 French-language edition, “Ladies” was replaced by the more inclusive “Femmes Célèbres”, under *Têtes des Grands Hommes Modernes*. Just twenty-three sitters were listed in 1787, with a further five added to the 1788 French supplement—women brought together because of their sex in a new type of enlightened discourse.

The year 1787 was pivotal for Wedgwood. He became heavily involved in the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade, developing the antislavery medallion for the cause, and his decision to expand his *Illustrious Moderns* to include a women’s section may have equally been politically motivated. Women were great supporters of the abolitionist movement, and any novel merchandise that would encourage them to visit his showrooms where they might receive pamphlets or hear discussions would have advanced the cause. Wedgwood always catered to the demands of his elite, cosmopolitan female consumers, soliciting their opinions on taste and design, and perhaps they had requested portraits of contemporary women alongside those of his *Illustrious Modern* men, to showcase their contributions to Georgian society and in the process redefine and widen women’s roles. Ever perceptive, Wedgwood must have sensed the mood of the day.

More than many merchants, Wedgwood led the commercialisation of leisure in the later eighteenth century. The rise of shopping as entertainment offered alternatives to the traditional female-dominated sites, such as the tea-table in the privacy of the home, where gossip networks played an essential role in the exchange of practical knowledge in unsupervised female conversations.

¹⁵ Through the dissemination of publications of members of the Bluestockings, acceptable topics such as running a household, marriage, economic dependence, and charity must have gradually included subjects covering female education, employment, exploitation, civil liberties, and legal rights, laying the groundwork for future female empowerment. Wedgwood’s London showroom, initially on Greek Street (1774–1797) in fashionable Soho, also offered a public place for women to congregate and network, catch a glimpse of a famous personality, overhear scandalous exchanges or engage in “feminist” dialogues.

No images survive of the Greek Street showroom or warehouse, but we are fortunate in having an aquatint of the later showroom on York Street, near St. James's Square, dated 1809 (fig. 5). The interior, with its large glazed cabinets filled with vases rather than books and purpose-built centre tables piled with tablewares instead of drawings and needlework, and furnished with window seats, resembled a private library, designed to make Wedgwood's customers feel relaxed, intellectually stimulated, and at home. His *Illustrious Moderns* may have been displayed in drawers in specimen cabinets or inside vitrine-topped tables, as depicted at the extreme right-hand side of figure 5, where several framed examples appear to be suspended on the wall. Wedgwood explained to Bentley his need for a large showroom: "And beside room for my Ware, I must have more room for my Ladys for they sometimes come in very large shoals together, & one party are often obliged to wait till another have done their business".¹⁶ These waves of consumers, glamorous members of the nobility and gentry and perhaps even the odd heroine, contributed to the spectatorship of commercialisation and the economies of desire.



Figure 5.

Rudolf Ackermann, Inside view of the showrooms of Wedgwood & Byerley, York Street, St. James's Square, published in *Ackermann's Repository of Arts*, February 1809, 1809, hand-coloured aquatint, 24.4 × 29.5 cm. Collection of the British Library (Maps.K.Top.27.24). Digital image courtesy of British Library Board / Bridgeman Images (all rights reserved).

Women were clearly the primary audience for these ceramic portraits of "Femmes Célèbres", but of course men may also have purchased examples, perhaps as sexualised icons or as paragons of the new femininity. According to the 1787 catalogue, the basic price for an *Illustrious Modern* head, if unframed and single colour (i.e. black basaltes), was one shilling, but, depending on size and material, a ceramic head could increase to as much

as a guinea (twenty-one shillings). Portrait medallions were in reach of ordinary women and men. The literate middle classes with sufficient purchasing power could acquire a single heroine or a pair; but a domestic servant earning two or three pounds in a year would have been more challenged. Unfortunately, there is little documentary evidence of who exactly were the consumers of these female heads.

The “Femmes Célèbres”

The final twenty-eight heads that comprised the “Femmes Célèbres” subsection under *Illustrious Moderns* were assembled in three phases identifiable in the 1779, 1787, and 1788 catalogues. The phases are characterised by very different histories. While they were marketed as a gallery or cabinet, aesthetically they never formed a uniform set, and they were acquired by customers individually on the basis of the sitter.



Figure 6.

Josiah Wedgwood and Thomas Bentley manufacturers, Portrait Medallion of Madame d'Estrée, circa 1779-80, stoneware (jasper), white on solid blue-coloured ground with gilt metal frame, verso impressed 'Wedgwood & Bentley', 5.6 cm. Collection of The British Museum (1909,1201.133). Digital image courtesy of The Trustees of the British Museum, London (all rights reserved).

The first sixteen heads in the list, recorded in 1787 and 1788, made their appearance in the 1779 catalogue as *et cætera* under section IV of *Illustrious Moderns*, "Divines, Artists, Antiquaries, Poets, Etc." and included the following: "Marchioness Pompadour"; "March. du Chatelet"; "March. de Savigny"; "Countess Grignan"; "Countess de la Sage"; "Countess de Barré"; "Madame Dacier"; "Mad. Clairon"; "Mad. de Scuderi"; "Mad. d'Estrées"; "Mad. des Houlières"; "Mad. de Montespan"; "Mad. du Boccage"; "Agnes Soreau"; "Ninon l'Enclos"; and "Laura" de Noves. They were primarily elite French women whose historical significance was either beauty, marriage to a European sovereign, or scandalous notoriety as the mistress of a famous man. For example, Gabrielle d'Estrées, Duchesse de Beaufort and Verneuil (1573-1599), was the fiercely loyal mistress, confidante, and adviser of

Henry IV of France, best known today for the provocative depiction, by an unidentified artist, of her in a bath with one of her sisters, who is pinching her nipple ¹⁷ Wedgwood's head is considerably more respectable, with the sitter wearing the costume, ruff, and jewellery identifiable in an engraving of about 1596 by Thomas de Leu (1560-1612) (fig. 6). ¹⁸

With this selection of historical characters Wedgwood was apparently appealing to an audience familiar with the following biographies: *Biographium Fæmineum* (1766); Pons Augustin Alletz (1703-1785), *L'Esprit Des Femmes Célèbres: Du Siecle de Louis XIV, Et de celui de Louis XV, jusqu'à present* (Paris, 1768); and perhaps Antoine Léonard Thomas's (1732-1785) *Essai sur le caractère, les mœurs et l'esprit des femmes dans les différens siècles* (Paris, 1772), translated by William Russell as *Essay on the character, manners and genius of Women in different ages* (1773). Thomas's tome considered the qualities that defined women across centuries: "whose genius had a character, who serve to illustrate the ideas or the manners of their age". He asked profoundly, if noted women were really noteworthy, and what makes a woman a woman. ¹⁹ As an enlightened thinker, Wedgwood may have been asking such questions with his choice to advance both his "feminist" and his commercial agenda.

In fact, these sixteen heads were after a group of bronze portrait medals purchased by Bentley in Paris, discussed in a letter from Wedgwood to Bentley on 7 September 1776: "I have just looked over the Heads & Bass-reliefs ... they may be usefull on various occasions, & the Heads will make a very valuable addition to our suite of modern Illustrious Personages. I observe *Pesez*, the Artist to whom we owe most of these Heads is a strong mannerist". ²⁰ An analysis of the dates of the 120 male and 23 female sitters by the unknown sculptor *Pesez*—perhaps a pseudonym—suggests a production date of circa 1750-1773, presumably made in France. ²¹ Their round, uniform size, struck on one side, with legends identifying the sitters, suggests that they were intended by *Pesez* to be sold as complete cabinets for amateur collectors. Very few Wedgwood portrait medallions from this early group survive, suggesting that they were not commercially successful. Was Wedgwood's "Femmes Célèbres" series initiated to reposition these slow sellers?

The second section includes portraits of contemporary British women: six educated members of elite society and one actress, each commissioned several years earlier by Wedgwood as individual portraits, but brought together as a subsection of female heads in 1787. Introduced here chronologically, the oldest portrait was of "Lady Charlotte Finch", Governess in Ordinary to the children of George III; she was fifty years old in 1774, when her portrait medallion was created by the independent wax sculptor Joachim

Smith (1758–1803).²² Sharing an interest in education with Wedgwood, the governess introduced many new trends in the royal nursery, especially in the use of educational toys.²³

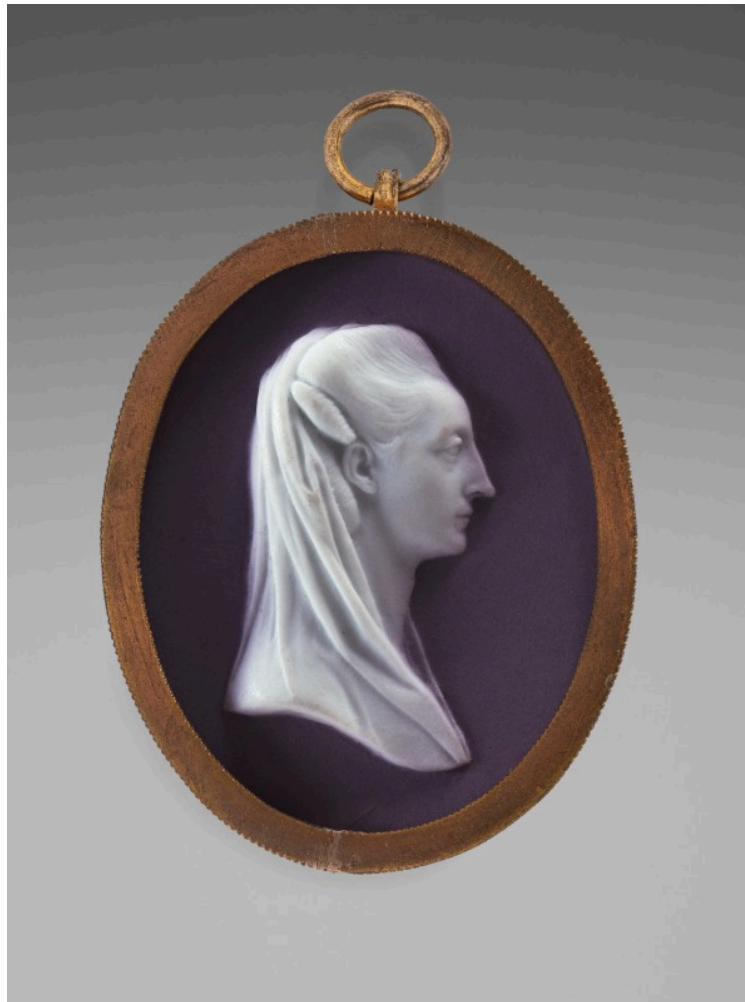


Figure 7.

Josiah Wedgwood and Sons manufacturers, Small Portrait Medallion of Elizabeth Montagu, 1775, stoneware (jasper ware), white on lilac-coloured ground, impressed 'Wedgwood', 4.1 × 3.3 × 1 cm. Collection of Harvard Art Museums / Fogg Museum, Bequest of Grenville L. Winthrop (1943.1609). Digital image courtesy of Harvard Art Museums (all rights reserved).

Next was the dissenting poet, reformist, and abolitionist Anna Laetitia Barbauld (1743–1825), whose portrait, also possibly by Smith, was created in early 1775, just two years after she had published *Poems* (1773), with four editions in its first year.²⁴ Her jasper ware portrait and that of her mentor, the leader of the Bluestockings, Mrs. Elizabeth Montagu (née Robinson, 1718–1800), a social reformer and champion of literary women, were reproduced in the *Westminster Magazine* in June 1776, in a volume entitled

“Observations on Female Literature in General”.²⁵ Montagu’s portrait as a stoic Herculaneum matron, by an unidentified sculptor, was also created around 1775 and was one of the first in blue jasper (fig. 7).²⁶ Significantly, the portraits were never intended as a pair: on 3 July 1775, Wedgwood wrote to Bentley: “Mrs. Montague & Mrs. Barbault are not model’d for a pair neither in size nor Character [*sic*]”.²⁷

The highest-profile sitter in this second group was Georgiana Cavendish, Duchess of Devonshire (née Spencer, 1757–1806), celebrated for her female empowerment, political influence, and intellectualism. Her portrait medallion—attributed to the sculptor John Flaxman Junior (1755–1826), who worked for Wedgwood between 1775 and 1787—was first recorded on 10 August 1782. Despite being pilloried in the press for her public campaigning for the Whig politician James Fox, her sometime lover, as well as for her heavy drinking and gambling, she remained a fashionable figure.²⁸ Less well known was Lady Dorothea Banks (née Hugessen, 1758–1828), wife of the distinguished explorer and botanist Sir Joseph Banks (1743–1820), whose portrait appeared by 20 March 1782.²⁹ Little known today, Ann Kennicott (née Chamberlayne, 1748–1830) was married to the Hebrew scholar the Reverend Dr. Benjamin Kennicott (1718–1783), librarian of the Radcliffe Library, Oxford, and studied Hebrew to assist her husband; her portrait is unidentified, and its existence only known by the reference in the 1787 and 1788 catalogues.³⁰ She was associated with Montagu’s Bluestockings and the abolition of the slave trade, and was friends with actress Eva Maria Garrick (née Veigel, 1724–1822) and the religious author Hannah More (1745–1833).³¹ The portraits of the actress Sarah Siddons will be discussed in the next section.

These portraits documented Britain’s female literati, contemporary, learned, articulate, and influential, captured in inspired images that enjoyed a timeless aura of antiquity. However, these “Ladies” were dated in costume and coiffure. Ardent fans inspired by the writings and causes of their heroines no doubt overlooked such flaws, but for the third phase of the “Femmes Célèbre”, added to the 1788 catalogue for the French and European markets, Wedgwood may have responded to negative sartorial discourse among his fashion-conscious consumers in the selection and presentation of his sitters. The entrepreneur was more than aware that fashion and style drove the commercial side of the decorative arts, with consumers hungry for novelty and the latest designs. Consequently, it was fashion, rather than virtue or erudition, that formed the main subject in the third group of portraits, which included an international roster of the glitterati, dressed in the latest fashions, so by design forming an almost uniform gallery of female heads.

The grandest of these five heads was Her Royal Highness Princess Charlotte Augusta Matilda (1766–1828), later Queen Charlotte of Württemberg, the eldest daughter of King George III and Queen Caroline. Her portrait is attributed to the sculptor John Charles Lochée, who was at the time “Portrait Modeller to his Royal Highness Prince William Henry”, the sitter’s brother; in 1787, Lochée was paid for wax portraits of George III’s four sons, so may have had the opportunity to create one of the Princess Royal.³² European royalty is represented by Maria I, Queen of Portugal (1734–1816), who was depicted in two Wedgwood portrait medallions. The earlier, after a wax portrait by Flaxman, was invoiced on 1 June 1787, as “A model of the Queen of Portugal, £3.3.0”.³³ Logically, it should have been the Flaxman portrait offered in the 1788 catalogue; however, a second portrait, stylistically similar to the “Princess Royal”—and by association attributed to Lochée—also survives. If this second portrait was not that offered in 1788, it may suggest that Wedgwood was working towards a set of uniform portrait medallions.³⁴



Figure 8.

John Charles Lochée, Josiah Wedgwood & Sons manufacturers, Portrait of the Princesse de Lamballe, 1787/88, stoneware (jasper ware), white on black-coloured ground, verso impressed 'Wedgwood', 9.6 cm. Collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London (C.19-1916). Digital image courtesy of Victoria and Albert Museum, London (all rights reserved).

The sitters in both these commissions are depicted with their hair in a fashionable, naturalistic style, known as *coiffure à l'enfant*, cut just beneath the ears at the sides of the face, powdered, teased, and curled for volume, with long wavy ringlets at the back. The fashion was introduced in the early 1780s by Marie-Antoinette, Queen of France, who was suffering from hair loss, and quickly adopted by her loyal courtiers.³⁵ Among these was the wealthy Princess Marie Thérèse Louise of Savoy, Princesse de Lamballe (1749-1792), Surintendante de la Maison de la Reine from 1775, the highest rank possible for a lady-in-waiting at Versailles. While the trend was disseminated through French fashion plates, it may have been popularised in England when the princess visited in the summer of 1787 to take the waters

in Bath for her health. Wedgwood's portrait medallion of "La Princesse de Lamballe" adopting this influential hairstyle, introduced in the 1788 catalogue, was created by Lochée in 1787 (fig. 8).³⁶

Lochée, whose "over-flamboyant" manner brilliantly suited this new voluminous coiffure, enjoyed an impressive client list that included royalty and the aristocracy. He also provided commercial work to James Tassie, who listed eight "enamel" or vitreous paste portraits after Lochée in his 1791 catalogue, including one of the Princesse de Lamballe.³⁷ With Flaxman leaving for Italy in September 1787, Wedgwood increasingly turned to Lochée, until the latter declared bankruptcy in 1791. Lochée's customers may have influenced the development of this third phase of the "Femmes Célèbres": for example he worked for the husband of the Anglo-Irish Catholic convert and heiress, Mary Elizabeth Grenville, Marchioness of Buckingham (née Nugent, 1759–1812), part of an aristocratic power couple, both of whom appeared in 1788.³⁸ The fifth sitter was Anne, Lady de la Pole (née Templer, 1758–1832), best known for her full-length portrait painted in 1786 by George Romney (1734–1802), who though unknown today may have been admired at the time for her wealth, beauty, or taste.³⁹

Beyond Celebrated, a Celebrity: "Mrs. Siddons"

Situated among these celebrated elite, privileged women is Sarah Siddons, an actress who challenged conventional notions of femininity, and perhaps more than any of the others elevated the status of women. Siddons was born into an unusually moral and religious theatrical dynasty, which coloured her adult life.⁴⁰ Her personal struggles—marriage to a fellow thespian jealous of her celebrity—brought her domestic loneliness; from them she derived depths of emotion that she drew on for her public performances. Siddons made tragedy her triumph, transforming distressed wives and mistresses, with their traditionally passive roles, into heroines, imbuing each character with an unprecedented dignity.⁴¹ While the reputations of other actresses were tarnished by a persistent association with prostitution and scandal, Siddons's renowned virtue and professionalism were reinforced by her choice of parts that de-emphasised her sexuality: models of female worship, such as the pious daughter, affectionate wife, and tender mother.

The extent of her fame was enormous, and even today, primarily based on the countless images of her that survive. The statuesque actress had or acquired a noble bearing, and it was said that "she looks, walks, and moves like a woman of a superior rank", which widened her appeal.⁴² Siddons embraced public celebrity to a degree considered unseemly in a lady of gentility, and her ambition to succeed was driven by the need to support her

children. She was able to reject compromise, never lowering her standards of decorum, thanks to her financial success on the stage. Siddons's performances gave her audience, especially women, permission to break with the expected conventions of politeness and restraint, and they famously responded with public expressions of grief and emotion in the form of fits of fainting and hysterics ("box-faintings and pit-faintings"), known at the time as "Siddons-mania".⁴³ The adulation and curiosity of her fans continued after the performances. Siddons once attended a party of the Bluestockings and recalled: "the people absolutely stood on the chairs round the walls, that they might look over their neighbour's heads to stare at me".⁴⁴

Wedgwood may have known many of his sitters, but how well did he know Siddons when he commissioned her portraits? He had clearly met or seen a performance by Siddons, as documented in a letter from his eight-year-old daughter Sarah (1776–1856), who had written to him from Etruria on 5 May 1784: "Have you seen Mrs. Siddons again? If you have, did you cry?"⁴⁵ The letter reminds us of the actress's ability to evoke powerful emotional reactions in men as well as in women. Other actresses, such as Emma Hamilton, famously the muse of George Romney, were as well-known at the time but were not included. So why, then, was Siddons? Was Wedgwood also suffering from "Siddons-mania", or was he a friend and admirer? Was he attracted by her commercial appeal as an actor and her "celebrification", or did she possess qualities similar to those of the celebrated women that constituted his ideal of femininity and might serve as a role model for his daughters and female customers?

Crafting Celebrity

There are at least two different ceramic portraits of Sarah Siddons, created sometime between 1782 and 1802, after which time few new heads were invented raising the question as to which one was available in 1787 and/or 1788—perhaps both?⁴⁶ The better-known model captures the actress in her breakout role, first performed on 30 October 1782, as the dagger-wielding Amazonian Euphrasia in the tragedy by Arthur Murphy (1727–1805), *The Grecian Daughter*, published and first staged in 1772 (figs. 3 and 4). The classical story, also known as 'Roman Charity', provided a strong female role model of heroic filial piety. It showcased the importance of father-daughter relationships that nurtured equality through emotional and intellectual ties as well as the conflicting allegiances owed after marriage to fathers and husbands. The role marked Siddons's triumphant return to the London stage at the Drury Lane Theatre, having failed in an earlier attempt in 1775–1776, when she suffered from aponia (loss of speech) and anxiety. She had chosen her best performance in a role she returned to in 1790, and the audience responded with characteristic "sobs and shrieks" during its eleven

performances: King George III, who was moved to tears by her roles, and Queen Charlotte attended a performance in January 1783.⁴⁷ It was Siddons's second production at Drury Lane, and ignited her celebrity, inspiring a wealth of painted and printed portraits, upon which Wedgwood capitalised.⁴⁸

Siddons's portrait medallion is highly unusual among the potter's body of work, firstly in the inclusion of an arm that hides her dagger-wielding arm in order to establish the scene, the violent climax of Act V.⁴⁹ In that moment she is about to stab Dionysus, the tyrant who has usurped her father's throne, before shouting "Now one glorious effort! ... A daughter's arm, fell monster, strikes the blow". The prominent "daughter's arm" decorously also conceals her breasts--which in an earlier scene suckled Evander, her starving father. Secondly, Siddons's head, although seen in profile with its straight nose, sits awkwardly above her unflattering, muscular, twisted neck, which is out of proportion with her narrow, twisted shoulders and foreshortened arm, creating rare tension and dynamism in the bas-relief that captures her unconventional, exuberant physicality on stage. Such atypical features as the arm, the muscular masculinity, and the challenging *controposto* suggest that Siddons had a hand in its design, striking one of her "attitudes" to convey the powerful emotions of filial protection while avoiding any tones of sexual indiscretion in this story of erotic maternity.⁵⁰

If the portrait medallion, usually impressed below the legend "Mrs. Siddons", was made less than a year after her first performance in 1782, the sculptor probably created the image from life, perhaps with Siddons posing in her costume, or after he attended a production. Only a few images of her role as Euphrasia were in circulation in 1782. The earliest, a canvas portrait of "Mrs. Siddons in the character of the Grecian Daughter", painted by William Hamilton (1750/51-1801) ([fig. 1](#)), was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1780, where the portrait inflamed "Siddons-mania".⁵¹ The stiff, off-balanced pose, captures a less dramatic scene in Act II: "And dost thou then, inhuman that thou art, Advise a wretch like me to know repose?" Hamilton's early painting promoted Siddons even before she returned to London, fuelling a demand for her image, though the painting was not engraved until 1789, by which time there were many other images in circulation.⁵²

Also in oval format, a more traditional, almost romantic, half-portrait of Siddons as Euphrasia, seated as if waiting in the Green Room at Drury Lane, was painted in 1782 by John Keyse Sherwin (1751-1790), who engraved and published it on 15 December 1782 ([fig. 2](#)).⁵³ Siddons appears in a similar print, standing and clutching the handle of a dagger hidden in her skirt, with the legend recording that it was after a pastel drawing executed in 1782 by a thirteen-year-old fan, the painter Sir Thomas Lawrence (1769-1830), who became a lifelong friend; it was engraved by Thomas Trotter

(circa 1750–1803) and published on 8 September 1783.⁵⁴ A more dramatic interpretation of the scene depicted on the medallion appeared in the *Town and Country Magazine*, vol. XVII, January 1785: “Mrs. Siddons in the Grecian Daughter / Euprha: Now One Glorious Effort”, which was after an engraving by John Barlow (circa 1759–1810), published in October 1784.⁵⁵

In the absence of comprehensive factory documents recording details of dates of creation and sculptors for Wedgwood’s portrait medallions, by tradition and by association this Siddons model as Euphrasia has been attributed to Flaxman on the strength of a receipt for a Flaxman bill that includes “Moulding a Bust of Mr. & Mrs. Siddons, £1. 11s. 6d.” and is dated between 28 April 1782 and 6 September 1783.⁵⁶ The invoice description, suggesting a double portrait, either a sculpture in the round or a bas-relief, is perhaps inaccurate, neither having been identified; Flaxman’s usual fee for creating a single portrait head was two guineas, so presumably the price of a mould of the bust or cast was much less.⁵⁷ No Wedgwood portrait medallion survives of Siddons’s husband, William Siddons (1744–1808), an unsuccessful actor, whom she had married in 1773; at the time of the bust, Siddons was about twenty-seven years old and had given birth to five of her seven children. In addition, a reference to “Siddons” was apparently recorded in the Oven Books in 1782, either for the aforementioned bust or the portrait medallion.⁵⁸ For Wedgwood to produce a model of a newly fashionable actress within months of her first stage success would have been a highly speculative enterprise, with a risk of damaging his reputation if she became embroiled in inappropriate circumstances.

A later reference to a bust of Mrs. Siddons appears in a Flaxman letter to Wedgwood, dated 5 February 1784:

Since I repaired [improved or altered] the bust of Mrs. Siddons after moulding, a friend of mine, J. B. Burgess, Esq., of Bedford Square, has been very desirous to purchase it, to set it with the model of Mercury and several other models he has of mine. As you have the mould of the model, I think it cannot be of much use. To let Mr. Burgess have it will oblige him, and be of some advantage to me. You may depend on this, no other use will be made of it than being placed in his study, and if I have your permission to sell it to him, I shall take off half of my charge for it in your bill.⁵⁹

The passage, which alludes to the threat of piracy on the part of Burgess as well as Flaxman’s commercial concerns, strongly suggests that there was indeed a bust of Mrs. Siddons, but perhaps in character, and thus no longer

identifiable. The model of Mercury may be the Wedgwood bust, attributed to Flaxman, who referred to his plaster cast of the bust when offered to Wedgwood for his study in a letter dated 28 August 1782.⁶⁰

Another frequently cited link between Flaxman and Siddons are the figures created for a jasper ware chess set that he designed for Wedgwood between 30 October 1783 and 1 December 1784.⁶¹ These figures are based on the attitudes of various Shakespearean characters, and their design influenced by Flaxman's fascination with the medieval revival style. There are three different models of kings and queens, all of which are depicted in an original drawing by Flaxman, invoiced on 8 March 1785 for £6 6s. 6d.⁶² The *trompe l'oeil* drawing includes the seventeen chess figures produced by the manufactory and may have been intended to be shown to London customers to solicit orders. Since at least 1864, with convincing evidence, the kings and queens have been identified as Siddons and her brother, John Philip Kemble (1757–1823), also an actor, whom Flaxman portrayed elsewhere.⁶³ While often catalogued as being after their principal roles in *Macbeth*, one of the Queens with a crown and plaited hair closely resembles Flaxman's drawings of Siddons as Constance in Shakespeare's *King John*, circa 1783.⁶⁴ A third queen has a bent arm that disguises a dagger in her other hand, a pose that the portrait medallion closely references, strengthening its attribution to Flaxman (fig. 9).⁶⁵ Siddons and her brother presumably had some input into their portraits for the chess set, suggesting the attitudes and roles, but nothing is recorded.



Figure 9.

John Flaxman Jnr, Josiah Wedgwood & Sons manufacturers, Chess-piece of a Queen with a Portrait of Sarah Siddons as Euphrasia, circa 1783-1785, jasper ware, base impressed 'Wedgwood', 8.89 cm. Collection of The British Museum (1890,0512.2). Digital image courtesy of The Trustees of the British Museum, London (all rights reserved).

As Heather McPherson has argued, Siddons was very much an agent in the control and distribution of her image, and there is every indication that she would have participated in the design process of some of these images, suggesting the pose, scene, or costume. ⁶⁶ Siddons is known to have voiced strong opinions on artistic interpretations of her carefully crafted brand. In 1789, when in Birmingham, Siddons purchased a plaster bust of herself in a shop “where busts of distinguished personages were sold”, with the idea that she could make a better likeness of herself than “this wretched production”. ⁶⁷ Having studied ancient statuary and casts for melodramatic attitudes and costume inspiration, it was no surprise that the actress took up sculpture as a hobby, modelling in clay from 1789, and becoming a “pupil” of her friend

Anne Seymour Damer (née Conway, 1748–1828), Britain’s first professional female sculptor and a member of the Bluestockings.⁶⁸ An example of Siddons’s work, a plaster self-portrait bust in the guise of a classical figure, wearing a headdress with a chin strap, circa 1790–1795, is now in the Victoria and Albert Museum.⁶⁹

Between 1793 and 1795, Siddons is recorded as a customer of Bartholomew Papera (circa 1749–1815), head of a family of plaster figure makers, and her self-portrait plaster bust may have been moulded by them for distribution to friends and family.⁷⁰ More significantly, Siddons produced a Wedgwood-style self-portrait medallion as a virtuous Greco-Roman matron, an image of which, engraved by William Ridley (1764–1838) ([fig. 10](#)), was published in the *Monthly Mirror*, a literary periodical, on 1 August 1796.⁷¹ McPherson has identified her role as Ariadne in Murphy’s *The Rival Sisters*, in which Siddons performed in the 1792–1793 season.⁷² The medallion, which has not apparently survived, suggests that Siddons was more than capable of producing a design for Wedgwood to copy, so is it possible that she designed the original model of herself as Euphrasia, improved by William Hackwood or another sculptor employed by the manufactory, perhaps around 1790, when the role was revived? Alternatively, Siddons may have based her image on the Wedgwood portrait, which has a similar profile with a long straight nose. A third Wedgwood medallion identified as “Mrs. Siddons”, circa 1795, only known from its intaglio working mould, and now in the The Victoria and Albert Museum Wedgwood Collection, resembles both her sculpted bust and engraving, evidence of a continued relationship between Siddons and Wedgwood ([fig. 11](#)).



Figure 10.

William Ridley, Portrait of Mrs Siddons, inscribed "Engraved by Ridley from a Medallion modelled by Mrs Siddons / Publish'd for the Proprietors of the Monthly Mirror, by T. Bellamy, King St, Covent Garden, August 1st 1796", 1796, stipple engraving, 16.2 × 11.3 cm. Collection of The British Museum (1931,0509.171). Digital image courtesy of The Trustees of the British Museum, London (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).



Figure 11.

Josiah Wedgwood & Sons manufacturers, Portrait of Mrs. Siddons, circa 1795, intaglio working mould, stoneware, 4.7 × 4.3 × 1.9 cm. Collection of the Victoria & Albert Museum, Wedgwood Collection (WE.7343-2014). Digital image courtesy of Victoria & Albert Museum, London (all rights reserved).



Figure 12.

Attributed to John Charles Lochée, Josiah Wedgwood & Sons manufacturers, Portrait Medallion of Sarah Siddons, 1787/91, (jasper ware), white on blue-coloured ground verso impressed 'Wedgwood', 11.5 cm. Collection of the Victoria & Albert Museum, Wedgwood Collection (WE.5583-2104). Digital image courtesy of Victoria and Albert Museum, London (all rights reserved).

Though Siddons projected a strong persona on the stage, the public and the private often blurred in her image as a celebrity. In contrast to the well-known model of “Mrs. Siddons” in her public role as the “Tragedy Queen” discussed earlier, the second model appears to depict her private persona, her “real” self as a lady of fashion, and may be dated to circa 1787–1788, stylistically attributable to Lochée (fig. 12). A Lochée portrait of Siddons is recorded in Tassie’s 1791 catalogue as model 14426, “Mrs. Siddons, the celebrated actress in London. Modelled by Lochée”. Though extremely scarce, this second portrait is more conventional in format, with the actor

portrayed wearing a veil or a simple, oversized mobcap (or bonnet), unusually flattened, and a modest, classically inspired gauze gown, which chastely covers any cleavage.

While the tone is more aligned with Thomas Gainsborough's *Mrs. Siddons*, 1785, a striking, aristocratic portrait of a lady of quality, it is still ambiguous.⁷³ It may depict Siddons in character as Isabella, in Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, pleading on behalf of her brother sentenced to death for adultery, or the title role in *Isabella, or the Fatal Marriage*, first performed in 1694, by Thomas Southerne (1660–1746), about a devoted mother and faithful widow who remarried only to discover her husband was still alive.⁷⁴ Demonstrating the ways that the boundaries between the personal and the private blurred, Siddons was joined by her eight-year-old son in the role that established her reputation. The jasper ware portrait resembles various print sources; however, it may have been based on an unfinished sketch by Sir Joshua Reynolds, circa 1784, which was lent out to other artists to copy.⁷⁵ In the absence of direct sources, Wedgwood's second portrait medallion of Siddons appears to be an original work, perhaps taken from life. Its rarity suggests it may not have been successful. Perhaps Siddons was displeased with it, prompting her to design, or even commission, a new portrait for her own portrait medallion.

Siddons's thoughts on her Wedgwood portraits—available in black basaltes or the more costly two-colour jasper ware—if indeed she ever saw them or sat for them, have not been chronicled, but she frequently voiced opinions on her representations. In her most famous portrait by Sir Joshua Reynolds, *Sarah (Kemble) Siddons as the Tragic Muse* (1783–1784), the actress apparently requested that the artist not heighten the colouring of her face but keep its natural pallor, “so deeply accordant with the concentrated musings of her pale melancholy”, hence tragedy.⁷⁶ To have added rose colour to her cheeks would have cheapened and distracted from her ghostly, corpse-like character, captured in the lustrous black basaltes. However, the pure white, porcelain-like bas-reliefs on the jasper ware suggests the artifice of cosmetics in the form of white, lead-based makeup that signified the seductive appearance of prostitutes, an association that Siddons spent her entire career avoiding.⁷⁷ As Heather McPherson has argued, Siddons's public tragic pallor was a signifier of the emotional depth and authenticity of her acting, distinguishing her from other actresses and identifying her image or brand, which was impossible to capture in Wedgwood's monochrome studies.⁷⁸

Commodifying Celebrity

Celebrity feeds on a public gaze and Siddons, as a public figure by choice, whose image circulated as part of a publicity machine, not only accepted the commodification of her image, but understood that her fame depended upon the currency of her image remaining in circulation for as long as possible. By contrast, some of Wedgwood's "Femmes Célèbres" may have begun as private commissions, limited to a dozen or more examples and shared only with friends and family. This raises the question of who owned the "copyright" for these ceramic images: Wedgwood, the sculptor, or the sitter. How did elite women feel about their objectification and uneasy commercialisation, resituating them from private to public, on display for all to see in Wedgwood's showrooms and subject to the critique or scorn of their peers or "inferiors"? Were they excited to see themselves mass produced in a technologically new material? Was it a marker of status to be depicted by Wedgwood and included among his "Ladies"?

The commodification of modern celebrity in the eighteenth century was primarily disseminated through printed images, mass produced on a prodigious scale. Mezzotints in particular had levelled the public field for duchesses and courtesans, blurring "the socially marginal and the socially central", so that "women of pleasure and women of quality became visually interchangeable".⁷⁹ Kevin Bourque has argued that another actor, Catherine "Kitty" Fisher (1741-1767), a socially disenfranchised woman associated with the world of prostitution, was elevated through the circulation of mezzotints of her portrait by Joshua Reynolds, achieving a status similar to that of elite, socially prominent and aristocratic women, many of whom began to imitate her pose and fashion sense.⁸⁰ This levelling was not new, as Sir Peter Lely's seventeenth-century "Windsor Beauties" included mistresses alongside noblewomen. Only in visual and material culture could an actress like Siddons be considered an equal of royals and aristocrats.

Consuming Celebrity

Wedgwood's cabinet of female portraits appealed to an elite, erudite market, mimicking masculine-gendered patterns of collecting in a slightly patronising manner. Women could purchase examples piecemeal as novelties admired individually, rather than as complete sets. Similarly, Wedgwood's stoneware sits slightly outside the usual trope associating ceramics, especially porcelain, with female consumers, as black basaltes and jasper wares were often large, expensive, academic objects more associated with masculinity than femininity. Wedgwood's "Femmes Célèbres" encouraged women to

partake in male collecting cultures, enjoyed privately or shared among a group of like-minded friends and stimulating conversations, intellectual, gossipy or captious.

Wedgwood's female heads played easily into gift culture and exchange, exploiting the collective fascination with fame and desire. Such portraits offered an intimacy with the sitter, not imaginable in reality, which fed the flames of fantasy and admiration, strengthening and encouraging their emotional attachments.⁸¹ In contrast to graphic, two-dimensional portraits hung behind glass on a wall or glued into an album, small-scale, bas-relief sculptures offered a completely different experience. To hold in the palm of the hand a representation of an absent loved one or an admired poet, known only through their writings, provided a physical intimacy through touch: the familiar to be examined for accurate likenesses, and the unfamiliar to be studied for insight into their character.⁸² These miniature bas-relief sculptures could be stroked and caressed, even kissed, easily slid into a pocket or worn as pendants and carried throughout the day as talismans. The sensation of touch, which has its own memory, has been explored by Rebecca Howard, who describes how bronze portrait medals convey the impression of a sitter's soul through material sensitivities: weight, textures, and even temperature changes, features that could be applied to ceramic bodies which warm through being held and manually played with.⁸³ Small, easily portable things offer intimate experiences not possible with large furnishing or functional objects more typically associated with the decorative arts.

Conclusion

The 1788 catalogue was the last eighteenth-century catalogue produced by the manufactory. A few contemporary female heads in the manner of Loché appear to have been produced after 1788, perhaps intended as additions to develop the "Femmes Célèbres" series; but with the sculptor's disappearance in 1791, its development apparently ceases. As an agent of social change, Wedgwood consistently negotiated the public and private, commercial and benevolent. His "feminist" agenda in the creation of a gallery of female worthies, a selection of inspirational women, many of whom possessed qualities he admired—independence, intelligence, and industry—came to a close in the final decade of the eighteenth century. This group of twenty-eight women, primarily educated, elite, white women of immense privilege and beauty, were, on the one hand, objectified and commodified for his financial gain under the banner of *Illustrious Moderns*; but on the other, their lives and achievements were celebrated for the improvement of society.

A sympathetic liberal dissenter with a natural disinterest in celebrity and the aristocracy, except for commercial purposes for their ability as influencers and customers, Wedgwood's passion for the education of women and respect for their contributions to daily life competed with other obsessions, especially his very public interest in the abolition of the slave trade, and his personal triumph, the manufacture of a perfect copy of the Portland vase in 1789. The impact of the French Revolution on trade and commerce must have thwarted many projects. Seen through a twenty-first-century lens, Wedgwood had an opportunity, albeit costly, to commission an outstanding gallery of contemporary British women involved in the education and promotion of women's causes, including controversial figures such as the historian Catharine Macaulay, Mary Wollstonecraft, Hannah More, and Elizabeth Carter. More daringly, he could have commissioned portraits of women of African descent.

Wedgwood's contemporary women sitters were admired and judged "by the way that they invented and promoted carefully crafted versions of themselves".⁸⁴ While the entrepreneur was not driving an overt agenda of female empowerment, the message to his daughters and his customers was that women's public roles and contributions to society needed to be acknowledged. Two centuries and more later, the most powerful voice from his "*Femmes Célèbres*" still comes from the least privileged, the actor Sarah Siddons, balancing the demands of career and family. Though from humble roots, Siddons paralleled the challenges of elite, educated, literary women in achieving public recognition, yet faced greater gendered obstacles, because of her craft.⁸⁵ For the average women of the "middling" classes, Siddons broke the greatest ground in questioning the conventional notions of what it meant to be a woman in Georgian Britain, while presenting a public role model for a virtuous life grounded in domesticity, motherhood, and respectability, and defining for future generations a new femininity. Her two ceramic portraits demonstrate the complexities of eighteenth-century feminism, a self-fashioned public face and a surrendered private representation. As Siddons herself wrote in around 1817, "perhaps in the next world women will be more valued than they are in this".⁸⁶ Which twenty-first-century women would Wedgwood ennoble in stoneware today?

Footnotes

- ¹ For a satirical print see the British Museum, London inv.-no. 1868,0808.4548, and for a printed curtain fabric see The Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY inv.-no.17.13.2.
- ² The standard work on Wedgwood's portrait medallions is Robin Reilly and George Savage, *Wedgwood: The Portrait Medallions* (London: Barrie & Jenkins, 1973), which presented almost 400 sitters alphabetically.
- ³ There were seven eighteenth-century editions, the first published in 1773.
- ⁴ See British Museum, London, inv.-no. 1887,0307,I.96.
- ⁵ For a discussion and history of the invention of jasper ware, see Robin Reilly, *Wedgwood*, 2 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1989), 2:517-539.

- 6 John Boardman, *The Marlborough Gems: Formerly at Blenheim Palace, Oxfordshire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).
- 7 Catherine II of Russia amassed a huge collection of antique gems, as well as glass paste imitations by James Tassie, as did the Princesse de Lamballe. See Mikhail B. Piotrovski, *Treasures of Catherine the Great* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2000), 125; Sarah Grant, *Female Portraiture and Patronage in Marie Antoinette's Court: The Princesse de Lamballe* (London: Routledge, 2019).
- 8 Jean Dassier (1676–1763) was a member of a family of prolific Swiss medallists; and see Wedgwood to Bentley, 24 February 1776, in Katherine Euphemia, Lady Farrer, ed., *Letters of Josiah Wedgwood*, 3 vols. (Manchester: E. J. Morten [for] the Trustees of the Wedgwood Museum, 1903, reprinted in 1973), 2:160–161, citing E.18657-25.
- 9 Reilly and Savage, *Wedgwood*, 117–118.
- 10 Anonymous, *Biographium Faemineum. The female worthies: or, memoirs of the most illustrious ladies of all ages and nations* (London: Printed for S. Crowder and J. Payne, 1766), 163.
- 11 Arianne Chernock, “Cultivating Woman: Men’s Pursuit of Intellectual Equality in the Late British Enlightenment”, *Journal of British Studies* 45, no. 3 (July 2006): 520n42.
- 12 Farrer, *Letters*, 1:9, 26 October 1762.
- 13 See Elizabeth Eger and Lucy Peltz, *Brilliant Women: 18th-Century Bluestockings* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008).
- 14 Jane Rendall, *The Origins of Modern Feminism: Women in Britain, France and the United States, 1780–1860* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1985), 1.
- 15 Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace, *Consuming Subjects: Women, Shopping, and Business in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 30.
- 16 Farrer, *Letters*, 1:150–152, 31 May 1767, citing E.18149-25.
- 17 *Gabrielle d’Estrées et une de ses soeurs* (circa 1594), Musée du Louvre, Paris, inv.-no. RF1937-1.
- 18 For the engraving, British Museum, inv.-no. 2AA+, a.71.53.
- 19 Natasha Lee, “Sex in Translation: Antoine Léonard Thomas’s ‘Essai sur les femmes’ and the Enlightenment Debate on Women”, *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 47, no. 4 (2014): 389–405.
- 20 Farrer, *Letters*, 2:305, citing E.18688-25.
- 21 Jean Tremblot de La Croix, “Le médailleur Pesez et sa série d’hommes et de femmes célèbres”, *Revue de la Numismatique française*, Paris, 5th ser., vol. 6 (1942): 123–131. A collection is in the Münzkabinett, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin.
- 22 Reilly and Savage, *Wedgwood*, 137.
- 23 Jill Shefrin, *Such Constant Affectionate Care: Lady Charlotte Finch—Royal Governess & the Children of George III* (Los Angeles: Cotsen Occasional Press, 2003).
- 24 Reilly and Savage, *Wedgwood*, 57.
- 25 National Portrait Gallery, inv.-no. D4458, Reference Collection; Eger and Peltz, *Brilliant Women*, 67.
- 26 Reilly and Savage, *Wedgwood*, 246.
- 27 Farrer, *Letters*, 2:230, citing E.18605-25.
- 28 Reilly and Savage, *Wedgwood*, 122; Victoria and Albert Museum, London, inv.-no. C.120-1956.
- 29 Reilly and Savage, *Wedgwood*, 57; Arlene Leis, “‘A Little Old-China Mad’: Lady Dorothea Banks (1758–1828) and Her Dairy at Spring Grove”, *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 40, no. 2 (June 2017): 199–221.
- 30 Reilly and Savage, *Wedgwood*, 205.
- 31 Nigel Aston, “Kennicott, Benjamin (1718–1783)”, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 23 September 2004, DOI:10.1093/ref:odnb/1540.
- 32 Royal Collections Trust, Windsor Castle, RCIN inv.-no. 45784; Terrence Hodgkinson, “John Lochée, Portrait Sculptor”, *Victoria and Albert Museum Yearbook* (London: Phaidon, 1969), 152–160, 152; Reilly, *Wedgwood*, 569–570.
- 33 Llewellynn Frederick William Jewitt, *The Wedgwoods: being a life of Josiah Wedgwood* (London: Virtue, 1865), 278; Reilly and Savage, *Wedgwood*, 228–229.
- 34 For the Flaxman medallion see British Museum, inv.-no. 1853,1104.4, and for the rare Lochée-type medallion see V&A Wedgwood Collection, Barlaston, inv.-no. WE.6064-2014.
- 35 For a portrait medallion of Marie-Antoinette in the manner of Lochée, see Reilly and Savage, *Wedgwood*, 231b.
- 36 A portrait medal of Lamballe, cited as a possible prototype, in Grant, *Female Portraiture*, 91–93, is actually posthumous, circa 1792, see Christie’s, Paris, 3 November 2015, lot 60.
- 37 R.E. Raspe, *Tassie*, 1791, no. 14256.
- 38 Reilly and Savage, *Wedgwood*, 75.
- 39 Reilly and Savage, *Wedgwood*, 278.

- 40 Sandra Richards, *The Rise of the English Actress* (London: Macmillan, 1993), 73.
- 41 Richards, *Rise of the English Actress*, 76.
- 42 Robyn Asleson, ed., *A Passion for Performance: Sarah Siddons and her Portraitists* (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 1999), 79.
- 43 The term "Siddons-mania" appears in broadsides in 1783, for example on 12 June 1783, *Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser*, issue 17005, 3.
- 44 Asleson, *Passion for Performance*, 79.
- 45 Farrer, *Letters*, 3:15, no citation.
- 46 Reilly and Savage, *Wedgwood*, 306.
- 47 Philip H. Highfill Jr., Kalman A. Burnim, and Edward A. Langhans, *A Biographical Dictionary of Actors, Actresses, Musicians, Dancers, Managers & Other Stage Personnel in London, 1660-1800*, vol. 14, *S. Siddons to Thynne* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1993), 8, 10; Caroline Winterer, *The Mirror of Antiquity: American Women and the Classical Tradition, 1750-1900* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), 84; Heather McPherson, *Art and Celebrity in the Age of Reynolds and Siddons* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2017), 105; Lindal Buchanan, "Sarah Siddons and Her Place in Rhetorical History", *Rhetorica: A Journal of the History of Rhetoric* 25, no. 4 (Autumn 2007): 425.
- 48 Asleson, *Passion for Performance*, 20; and see a satirical print of a bare-breasted Siddons in the anonymous *The Rival Queens of Covent Garden and Drury Lane Theatres at a Gymnastic Rehearsal!*, London, 1782, British Museum, inv.-no. 1868,0808.4548.
- 49 A close parallel is Wedgwood's portrait medallion of a half-bust, dagger-wielding Marc Antony, circa 1778-1780, Law Library Special Collections, Florida International University, Miami, Spak Collection, inv.-no. 424.
- 50 Asleson, *Passion for Performance*, 9-10.
- 51 Exhibited as no. 339.
- 52 For the engraving by James Caldwell (1739-1822), after Hamilton, see National Portrait Gallery, inv.-no. D10715.
- 53 For the painting in the Victoria and Albert Museum, see inv.-no. Dyce.77; for the engraving, also in the Victoria and Albert Museum, see inv.-no. S.3017-2009.
- 54 Victoria and Albert Museum, inv.-no. S.3018-2009.
- 55 Victoria and Albert Museum, inv.-no. S.2371-2013; Highfill et al., *A Biographical Dictionary of Actors*, 14:55, no. 225; from the same scene, after Thomas Stothard, engraved by William Sharp, London, dated 10 April 1783, British Museum, inv.-no. 1841,1211.219.
- 56 Jewitt, *The Wedgwoods*, 274.
- 57 Josiah Wedgwood & Sons, *Wedgwood in London: a 225th Anniversary Exhibition, 18th May to 31st August 1984, to illustrate the company's trading activities and its close involvement with artistic, scientific, social and other aspects of London life* (Barlaston, Stoke-on-Trent: Josiah Wedgwood & Sons, 1984), 39, K16.
- 58 Reilly and Savage, *Wedgwood*, 306. Owing to Covid-19 restrictions it has not been possible to search the Oven Books, which survive for the periods 1778-1787 and 1790-1802. I thank Lucy Lead, archivist at World of Wedgwood, Barlaston, Staffordshire, for her assistance.
- 59 Samuel Smiles, *Josiah Wedgwood, F.R.S.: his personal history* (London: J. Murray, 1894), 214.
- 60 Smiles, *Josiah Wedgwood*, 226-228; Reilly, *Wedgwood*, 461, figs. 662 and 663.
- 61 Reilly, *Wedgwood*, 1:636-637.
- 62 V&A Wedgwood Collection at Barlaston, Stoke-on-Trent, inv.- no. E2-1339, illustrated in Reilly, *Wedgwood*, 1: fig. 962.
- 63 James D. Holmes and Howard Herschel Cotterell, "The Wedgwood Chessmen, Parts I-IV", *Antique Collector* 4, no. 2 (February 1933): 72-476; 4, no. 5 (May 1933): 537-538; 4, no. 8 (August 1933): 587-588; 5, no. 1 (January 1934): 12-13. For a suggestion that it must be Euphrasia, as her role as Lady Macbeth was not performed until 1785, see Heather McPherson, "Sculpting Her Image: Sarah Siddons and the Art of Self-Fashioning", in *Women and Portraits in Early Modern Europe: Gender, Agency, Identity* ed. Andrea Pearson (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2008), 183-202; Robert J. Reichner, "Wedgwood Chessmen", *Ars Ceramica* 7 (1990): 24-28.
- 64 For the drawings see Yale Centre for British Art, New Haven, CT, inv.-no. B1977.1.4.1897-1913; others are in the British Museum, inv.-no. 1913,0528.27-31.
- 65 For the model, circa 1783-1785, see British Museum, inv.-no. 1890,0512.2.
- 66 McPherson, "Sculpting Her Image", 183-202.
- 67 Thomas Campbell, *Life of Mrs. Siddons*, 1834, vol. 2, 166-167.
- 68 Asleson, *Passion for Performance*, 28; McPherson, "Sculpting Her Image", 187.
- 69 Victoria and Albert Museum, inv.-no. S.86-1978; for a plaster copy of the bust by Robert Shout (1764-1843), circa 1820, also in the Victoria and Albert Museum, see inv.-no. Dyce.3329.
- 70 <https://www.npg.org.uk/research/programmes/british-bronze-founders-and-plaster-figure-makers-1800-1980-1/british-bronze-founders-and-plaster-figure-makers-1800-1980-p>. In 1802, Wedgwood purchased busts of Siddons, Lord Nelson and the Hon. Mrs. Damer, from B. Papera, see Reilly *Wedgwood*, 2:457.

- 71 British Museum, inv.-no. 1931,0509.171.
- 72 McPherson, "Sculpting Her Image", 189.
- 73 National Gallery, London, inv.-no. NG683.
- 74 For the first see an illustration published by Harrison & Co., on 1 December 1782, Victoria and Albert Museum, inv.-no. Dyce.3065.
- 75 The painting is in the Ashmolean Museum of Art and Archaeology, Oxford, inv.-no. WA1929.2.
- 76 Huntington Library, Art Museum, and Botanical Gardens, inv.-no. 21.2; Laura Engel, *Fashioning Celebrity: Eighteenth-Century British Actresses and Strategies for Image Making* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2016), 54.
- 77 What, indeed, must the tragedienne have made of the coloured wax-portraits after her well-known Wedgwood portrait medallion; see Birmingham Museum of Art, Birmingham, AL, inv.-no. AFl.1233.2008.
- 78 Heather McPherson, "Tragic Pallor and Siddons", in "Performance", special issue, *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 48, no. 4 (Summer 2015): 479-502.
- 79 McPherson, "Tragic Pallor and Siddons", 479-502.
- 80 Kevin Bourque, "Heady Similitudes: Kitty Fisher, Mezzotint Culture, and Material Narratives of Celebrity, ca. 1750", *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 54, no. 2 (Winter 2021): 310.
- 81 Antoine Lilti, *The Invention of Celebrity: 1750-1850*, trans. Lynn Jefferies (Cambridge: Polity, 2017), 10.
- 82 Rebecca M. Howard, "The Sitter's Impression: Memory and Early Modern Portrait Medallions", *Journal of Material Culture* 24, no. 3 (2019): 293-312.
- 83 Howard, "The Sitter's Impression", 293-312.
- 84 Engel, *Fashioning Celebrity*, 146.
- 85 Buchanan, "Sarah Siddons and Her Place in Rhetorical History", 413-434.
- 86 Yvonne Ffrench, *Mrs. Siddons: Tragic Actress* (London: Derek Verschayle, 1954), 135, 146, cited in Richards, *Rise of the English Actress*, 81.

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