

**MARIA COSWAY**

1759-1838

**THE DEATH OF MISS GARDINER**

Pen and ink with gouache and watercolour on laid paper

7 1/8 x 8 3/8 inches; 183 x 213 mm

Painted 1789



Collections: Captain Carlo Prayer (1826-1900) [Lugt 2044];  
Bonham's, Knightsbridge, London, 21st November 2012, lot 47;  
Private Collection;  
Lowell Libson & Jonny Yarker Ltd.

Literature: Paris A. Spies-Gans, *A Revolution on Canvas: The Rise of Women Artists in Britain and France 1760-1830*, New Haven and London, 2022, pp.139-141, reproduced.

This rare, rapidly worked study was made by Maria Cosway in preparation for one of her most famous and successful exhibition works, *The Death of Miss Gardiner*, now in the collection of the Musée de la Révolution française, Vizille. Feted by artists, patrons and politicians across the Continent and an object of fascination to many of the men she met, Maria Cosway was one of the most considerable artistic figures in late eighteenth-century Europe. Thomas Jefferson, who met Cosway in Paris in 1786, described her as having 'qualities and accomplishments, belonging to her sex, which might form a chapter apart for her: such as music, modesty, beauty, and that softness of disposition which is the ornament of her sex and charm of ours.' Jefferson addressed a singular dialogue to Cosway, 'between my Head and my Heart', a frank admission of his romantic feelings for her. Like Angelica Kauffman and Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun, Cosway had to navigate the interest paid to her as an exhibiting painter and attention paid to her as an accomplished woman. Her marriage to the successful miniaturist Richard Cosway, resulted in her career being severely circumscribed and the present fluid study is one of very few that survive, giving unusual insight into her processes as an artist.

Maria Cosway was born in Florence, the daughter of Charles Hadfield, a member of the English Grand Tour community, who ran a celebrated hotel on Lungarno Capponi in the city. Her childhood was overshadowed by tragedy, when her elder siblings were murdered by a deranged maid-servant. Stephen Lloyd has suggested that this event 'profoundly affected her and can be seen as a major influence on her reaction to the early loss of her only child, Louisa, her intense Catholicism, and her later career as a pioneer of girls' education.' Brought up in the milieu of Grand Tour Italy, Cosway was encouraged by the male artists she encountered, spending time in Rome, where she later remembered that she: 'had the opportunity of knowing all the first living Artists intimately; Battoni, Mengs, Maron, and many English Artists. Fusely with his extraordinary visions struck my fancy. I made no regular study, but for one year and a half only went to see all that was high in painting and sculpture.'<sup>1</sup> In 1779 Maria moved to London where she married the successful miniaturist, Richard Cosway. The 1780s saw the Cosways establish themselves at the heart of fashionable London, close to the Prince of Wales and financially hugely successful. Maria Cosway exhibited a series of ambitious paintings at the Royal Academy from 1781 until 1789. Artistically inventive and iconographically diverse, Cosway illustrated scenes from Homer and Virgil to Pope and Ossian.

In 1789 Cosway exhibited *The Death of Miss Gardiner* at the Royal Academy, the painting illustrated a contemporary scene commemorated in a poem by George Townshend, 1<sup>st</sup> Marquess Townshend and published in 1788 in an anthology compiled by John Bell. Townshend described the tragic final moments of his niece Florinda Gardiner, daughter of Luke Gardiner, 1<sup>st</sup> Viscount Mountjoy. Sensing her own imminent death, she had a vision of her deceased mother and

'As late FLORINDA on her death bed lay...  
The sun meridian glimmer'd to her eye,  
And panting breath announc'd her end was nigh:  
She turn'd, and smiling ask'd, 'When shall I die?  
In realms above my long-mourn'd mother join?  
See, See her arms stretch'd out to meet with mine!  
Adieu, pure SOUL! With rapture take thy flight,  
Quit thy dark mansion for *Eternal Light!*-  
For bliss eternal! Whilst at Heaven's gate  
Thy sister Angels thy arrival wait,  
Swift to conduct thee to thy parent's breast;  
For *Heav'n* has heard, and granted they request.'

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<sup>1</sup> Maria Cosway writing in an autobiographical letter to Sir William Cosway. Quoted in: Stephen Lloyd, *Richard & Maria Cosway: Regency Artists of Taste and Fashion*, exh. cat. Edinburgh (National Gallery of Scotland), 1995, p.42.

The present sketch is Cosway's first idea for the painting. Florinda is shown in a loose white gown, seated with her aunt, Lady Townshend. In the background, Cosway has introduced a standing figure, possibly Florinda's spectral mother. Worked rapidly in ink, Cosway has organised the principal figures in broad, confident lines, working and reworking elements as the composition evolved, Cosway has then applied opaque washes to give a sense of the tonal contrasts at work. In the sketch, Cosway places the emphasis on Florinda's aunt, comforting and entreating her niece. The finished exhibition is more conventionally arranged, Florinda is shown lying down, her arm pointing to a heavenly light being consoled by her aunt in profile. Cosway's sketch affords rare insight into her artistic process, allowing us to observe the evolution of the composition.



Maria Hadfield Cosway  
*The Death of Miss Gardiner*  
Oil on canvas  
39 ¾ x 50 inches; 1010 x 1270 mm  
Painted in 1789  
Musée de la Révolution française. Inv. MRF 1994-30.  
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