Angelica Kauffmann

a biography

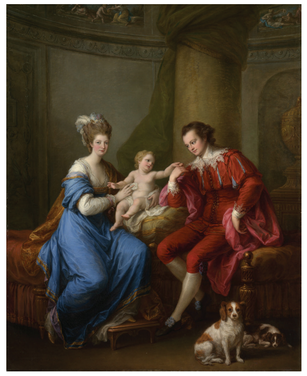
Angelica Kauffmann (Swiss, 1741–1807), *Angelica Kauffmann*, c. 1770–1775, oil on canvas, 29 x 24 in., National Portrait Gallery, Purchased, 1876, NPG 430 © National Portrait Gallery, London

Angelica Kauffmann was born October 30, 1741, in Chur, Switzerland, the only child of painter Johann Joseph Kauffman and Cleophea Lutz. As a child, her family moved around Switzerland, Austria, and Northern Italy as her father traveled in search of commissions. Kauffmann was a documented child prodigy who excelled in music and art from a young age. Her father oversaw her early artistic education, and by the time she was fifteen years old she was helping him on his church fresco projects and had completed several portrait commissions.

In June 1762, the family moved to Florence, where the young artist first discovered the Neoclassical style of painting. Several months later, in January 1763, the Kauffmanns moved to Rome, where they soon became connected with the extensive British community in the city. During this time, Kauffmann continued to paint portraits as well as learn English. The family next moved for several months to Naples, where she studied and copied works by the Old Masters. It was during this period that one of her paintings was first sent to a public exhibition in London. Upon returning to Rome, Kauffmann continued her portraiture career although she was determined to expand her oeuvre to history painting, a genre focused on depicting scenes from historical and contemporary literature, classical antiquity, and mythology. Considered one of the most prestigious forms of art, history painting had traditionally been an exclusively male endeavor. Despite conventions discouraging women from studying anatomy, Kauffmann pursued her artistic training, working from sculptures of the human form and studying perspective from artists Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1720–1778) and Charles-Louis Clérisseau (1721–1820). While in Rome, Kauffmann was recognized for her artistic abilities and accepted into the prestigious Accademia di San Luca at the age of 23.

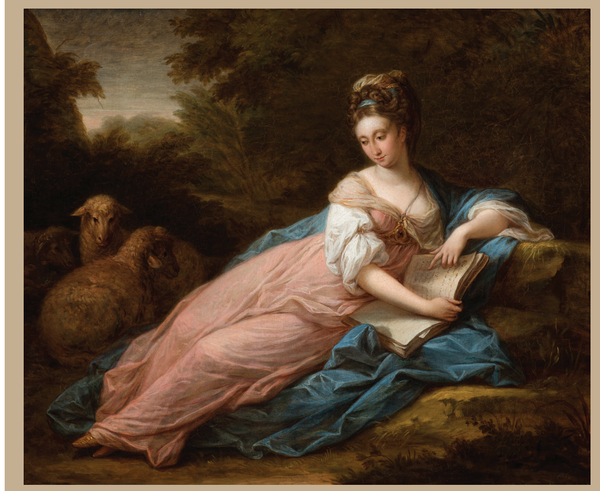
Lady Wentworth, the wife of an English diplomat in Rome, took notice of Kauffmann, and invited the artist to accompany her back to London. Leaving her father for the first time, she arrived in London in June 1766, at the height of Neoclassicism under the reign of King George III. There she became acquainted with other Neoclassical artists including American Benjamin West (1738–1820) and Englishman Sir Joshua Reynolds (1723–1792). In 1768 she became a founding member of the Royal Academy of Art, one of only two women to be honored in this way. During her early years in London she primarily produced portraits, driven by the high demand for her work among British royalty and prominent members of society. Kauffmann became known for depicting female sitters, and she often placed them in allegorical settings, likening these compositions to the history paintings about which she was passionate. As the Academy became more established, she returned to grand historical scenes, too, showing such works in its annual exhibitions.

Kauffmann left London in 1781 and returned to Italy, spending some time in both Venice and Naples before settling down in Rome. Throughout the next fifteen years she worked prolifically, creating large canvases with richly detailed compositions of classical scenes. She was immensely popular and her work during this period received numerous honors. Her studio became a fashionable tourist destination in Rome, with European nobility frequenting it on their visits to the city. In the late 1790s, Kauffmann began to paint less due to both the death of her husband and the Napoleonic Wars, which reduced tourism to Rome and therefore artistic commissions.



Angelica Kauffmann (Swiss, 1741–1807), *Edward Smith Stanley (1752–1834), Twelfth Earl of Derby, with His First Wife (Lady Elizabeth Hamilton, 1753–1797) and Their Son (Edward Smith Stanley, 1775–1851)*, c. 1776, oil on canvas, 50 x 40 in., The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Bernard M. Baruch, in memory of his wife, Annie Griffen Baruch, 1959, 59.189.2

Kauffmann died at the age of 66 on November 5, 1807. Because of her prominence in the Roman art scene, an elaborate funeral was orchestrated as a final tribute. Directed by the Neoclassical sculptor Antonio Canova (1757–1822), members of both Roman and foreign academies attended. Two of her paintings were carried triumphantly in her processional and the proceedings emulated the grand funeral of the Italian Renaissance master Raphael (1483–1520). Although Kauffmann was celebrated in her own time, she continues to be recognized as one of the most successful women artists prior to the late-nineteenth century.



Angelica Kauffmann

Swiss, 1741–1807

A Portrait of Mary Tisdal Reading

c. 1771–1772

oil on canvas, 24 3/4 x 29 3/4

Museum purchase with funds from The Jack Drew Art Endowment Fund for 18th- and 19th-Century Art, 2016.9

While living in London, Angelica Kauffmann was invited to spend six months in Ireland in 1771. There, she stayed with the Attorney General Philip Tisdal (1703–1777) and painted several portraits of Tisdal family members, including *A Portrait of Mary Tisdal Reading*. The painting depicts the Attorney General's younger of two daughters, Mary, reclining with a book in a picturesque landscape. She wears a classical antique pink dress and leans back on a blue cloth draped over a rocky ledge. She places her finger at her spot on the open page but looks down and away from the book, as if contemplating her reading. Behind her to the left are three sheep, sitting close together. Lush greenery behind the figures fills the background of the image.

This work is an example of Kauffmann combining traditional portraiture with a more allegorical style of painting, typical of historical scenes. A first generation Neoclassical painter, she frequently worked with formal compositions and historic subject matter to revive classical styles from Greek and Roman art. The portrait also contains elements of the Grand Manner tradition, a mode of painting that imbued portraits with heroic symbolism. As is typical with Grand Manner portraits, Kauffmann shows her sitter at full length rather than from the waist or chest up, which was more typical of traditional portraiture of the time.

Here, she cleverly imbues the portrait with allegorical significance by placing Mary in a fictional realm and imagining her as a character from the book she is reading. Kauffmann possibly envisions Mary as the princess Erminia, the heroine of "Gerusalemme Liberata" the 1581 epic poem by sixteenth-century Italian poet Torquato Tasso, known as "Jerusalem Delivered" in English. The poem was hugely popular and scenes from the story were frequently depicted in art, especially in the years leading up to the French Revolution and the Romantic period. The epic is a mythicized retelling of the First Crusade, in which the Saracen princess Erminia falls in love with Tancred, a Christian knight. Erminia, believing that Tancred was wounded in battle, goes to search for him. While looking for her love, she comes across a shepherd who exalts the joys of living a peaceful existence among his flock. Inspired by what he tells her, Erminia stays with him and his family for a brief time, becoming a shepherdess herself.

Discussion Questions

How did Angelica Kauffman construct her portrait of Mary Tisdal?

❍

Why do you think Kauffmann preferred history painting over portraiture?

❍

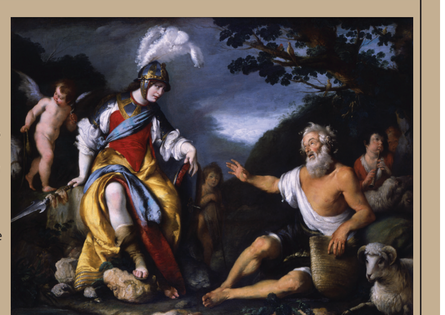
What challenges did Kauffmann encounter as a female artist?

Teachers: go to www.joslyn.org/education for this poster's related academic standards and lesson plans.

In addition to Joslyn's *A Portrait of Mary Tisdal Reading,* Angelica Kauffmann completed several paintings of the Tisdal family during her stay in Ireland. One such painting is *Mrs. Hugh Morgan and Her Daughter*, a double portrait of Mary's older sister Elizabeth and her young daughter Catherine, currently in the collection of the Art Institute of Chicago. In this painting, the two female figures are placed in an outdoor setting where Elizabeth sits on a ledge to the left, wearing a richly colored red gown. She lovingly dotes on Catherine, who holds a rose in one hand and leans towards her mother, resting on the basket of picked flowers in Elizabeth's lap. A small dog is curled at their feet. The same size as *A Portrait of Mary Tisdal Reading*, this work was likely created as a pendant painting to Joslyn's artwork, meaning the two canvases would have been originally intended to hang next to each other.

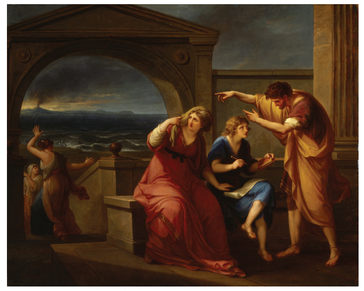
Angelica Kauffmann (Swiss, 1874–1807), *Mrs. Hugh Morgan and Her Daughter,* c. 1771, oil on canvas, 24 7/8 x 30 in., Art Institute of Chicago, Gift of Mrs. L. E. Block, 1960.873

Angelica Kauffmann's *A Portrait of Mary Tisdal Reading* plays an important role in the Museum's European collection. Not only is it one of the few works by a woman, but it also makes a connection to Joslyn's *Erminia Among the Shepherds* by Italian artist Bernardo Strozzi (1581–1644). It portrays a similar scene from "Gerusalemme Liberata," with an armored princess Erminia speaking to a shepherd.



Bernardo Strozzi (Italian, Genoese, 1581–1644), *Erminia Among the Shepherds,* 1620–1630, oil on canvas, 58 x 78 in., Joslyn Art Museum, Museum Membership Fund Purchase, 1952.270

Neoclassicism



Angelica Kauffmann (Swiss, 1741–1807), *Pliny the Younger and his Mother at Misenum, 79 A.D.*, 1785, 40 9/16 x 50 3/16 in., oil on canvas, Princeton University Art Museum, Museum purchase, gift of Franklin H. Kissner, y1969-89, Image © Princeton University Art Museum

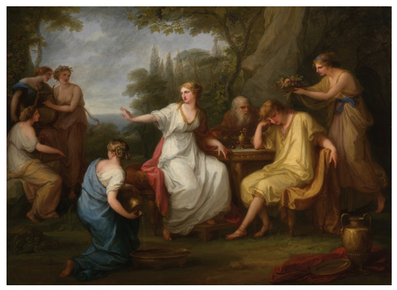
Neoclassicism first rose to prominence as an artistic movement throughout Europe in the second half of the eighteenth century. Developed from the Enlightenment's emphasis on knowledge, reason, and science, Neoclassical artists sought to imbue their work with rationality, ideal beauty, and truth. This movement was bolstered by renewed interest in classical antiquity in European popular culture. The archaeological discovery of buried treasures from classical societies, for example the excavations of ruins in Athens, Naples, and the Middle East, provided new and stimulating material for the public to experience and artists to study. Inspired by the simplicity, harmony, and proportion of these antiquities, artists would emulate the cerebral ideals they espoused in their own architecture, painting, and sculpture. This rigorous emphasis on logic and truth was also partially a reaction against the over-the-top nature of the Rococo style—an artistic movement in the early-eighteenth century that highlighted the opulence and frivolity of upper-class European lifestyles.

Theoretical and historical writings from this time period also contributed to the obsession with Greek and Roman art. Important scholars such as Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717–1768), a German archaeologist and philosopher with whom Angelica Kauffmann was acquainted, celebrated Greek art and architecture as the highest form of art. He rejected the notion that art imitates life, and instead believed that the Greeks had somehow achieved qualities in their art that were superior to nature. In his mind, Greek artists transcended realism to capture an artistic ideal that was more beautiful and perfect than anything in the natural world. Other scholars argued that Roman art and architecture was in fact superior to that of the Greeks, but between both schools of thought, classical antiquity was celebrated above all else.

Images (left to right): Benjamin West (American, 1738–1820), *The Battle of La Hogue* c. 1778, oil on canvas, 60 1/8 x 84 1/4 in., National Gallery of Art, Andrew W. Mellon Fund, 1959.8.1; Jacques-Louis David (French, 1748–1825), *The Death of Socrates,* 1787, oil on canvas, 51 x 77 1/4 in., The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Catharine Lorillard Wolfe Collection, Wolfe Fund 1931, 31.45

In the visual arts at this time, early Neoclassical painters included Angelica Kauffmann as well as Anton Raphael Mengs (1728–1779), Gavin Hamilton (1723–1798), Joseph-Marie Vien (1716–1809), Benjamin West (1738–1820), and Jean-Baptiste Greuze (1725–1805). Neoclassical artists incorporated the philosophies of classical beauty and rationalism in their depictions of scenes from historical events, mythology, and literature. By creating their compositions, artists also helped promulgate the popularity of revivalist styles among the public. As nobility and wealthy individuals would travel the European continent to explore recently rediscovered ruins of past civilizations, they would stop at artists' studios, purchasing paintings that depicted these types of scenes. Another influential figure, especially in the years leading up to and following the French Revolution, was the painter Jacques-Louis David (1748–1825). A student of Vien, David exhibited in the French Academy's exhibitions and is often considered the preeminent Neoclassical painter. His paintings depicted historical scenes and addressed themes that expressed sympathy for the French Revolution. Toward the end of the eighteenth century, people began to grow disillusioned with the rationality espoused by the Enlightenment. Neoclassicism declined and Romanticism, which emphasized emotion and individuality through dramatic scenes conveying human suffering, the power of nature, and exotic lands, took its place as the dominant European art movement.

The Royal Academy



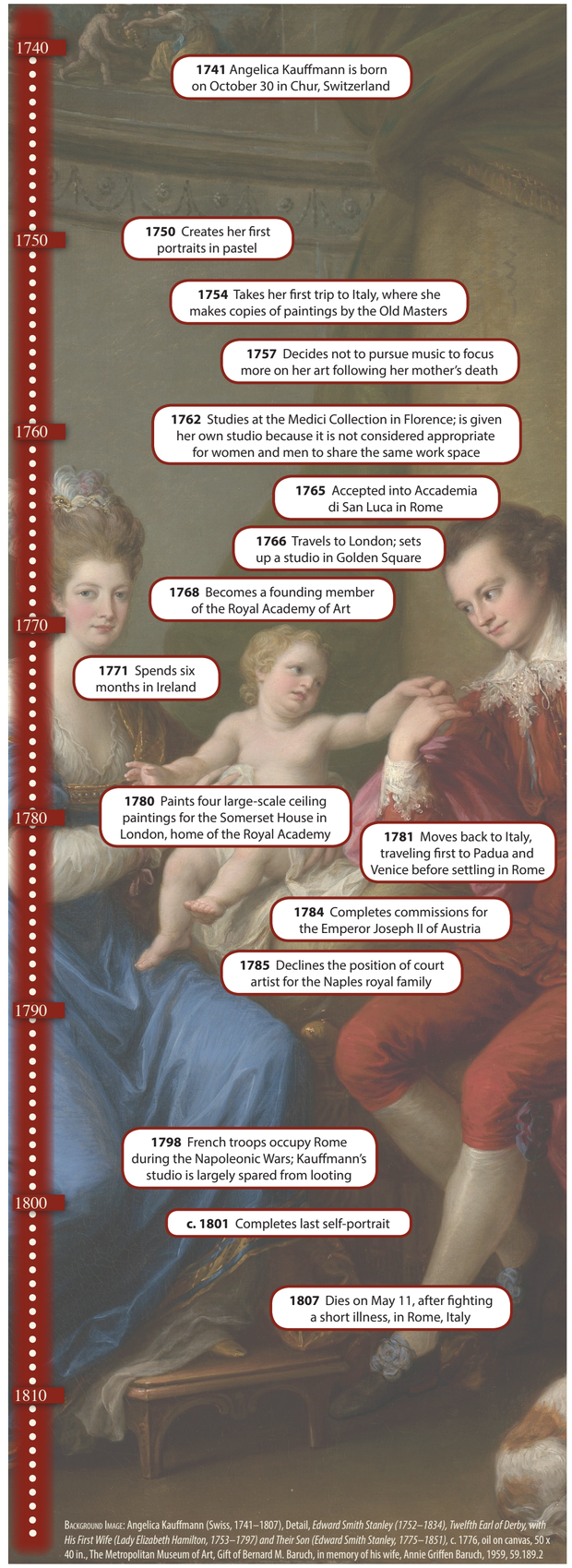
Angelica Kauffmann (Swiss, 1741–1807), *The Sorrow of Telemachus*, 1783, 32 3/4 x 45 in., oil on canvas, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bequest of Collis P. Huntington, 25.110.187

The Royal Academies in England and France were the most important professional art societies in Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The organizations played a variety of roles: they ran schools of artistic instruction, held juried exhibitions on an annual or semi-annual basis (known as salons in France), and provided gallery space for artists to display their work and thus grow their reputation. As the premier art venues in Europe, the Academies also served as arbiters of public taste.

The British Royal Academy originated in 1768 when architect Sir William Chambers (1723–1796) brought a petition to King George III. Signed by a group of artists and architects, the petition asked for the establishment of a society dedicated to promoting the "Arts of Design." The King approved the request, establishing the Royal Academy of Art. Though an English institution, not all of the founding members themselves were British. Of the 36 original members, four were Italian, one was French, one was Swiss, and one was American. Two of the founding members were women—Angelica Kauffmann and Mary Moser (1744–1819)—although it would take 168 years before another woman, painter Laura Knight (1877–1970), would be elected as a full member of the Academy. The first president of the Academy was artist Sir Joshua Reynolds (1723–1792).

The Academy's first official residence was at the Somerset House in London, designed by Chambers, and in 1867, it moved to its current London residence at the Burlington House. Today, there are a maximum of 80 members of the Academy at any given time. Elected by their peers, the Royal Academicians are practicing artists in the United Kingdom, and they come from the fields of painting, sculpture, printmaking, and architecture. The Academy hosts a variety of traveling exhibitions, displaying the works of notable British and international artists. Additionally, the annual Summer Exhibition, the world's largest open entry exhibition, displays work by emerging and established artists across genres and media. In 2018, the Academy will celebrate 250 years of existence.

Timeline



Background Image: Angelica Kauffmann (Swiss, 1741–1807), Detail, *Edward Smith Stanley (1752–1834), Twelfth Earl of Derby, with His First Wife (Lady Elizabeth Hamilton, 1753–1797) and Their Son (Edward Smith Stanley, 1775–1851)*, c. 1776, oil on canvas, 50 x 40 in., The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Bernard M. Baruch, in memory of his wife, Annie Griffen Baruch, 1959, 59.189.2

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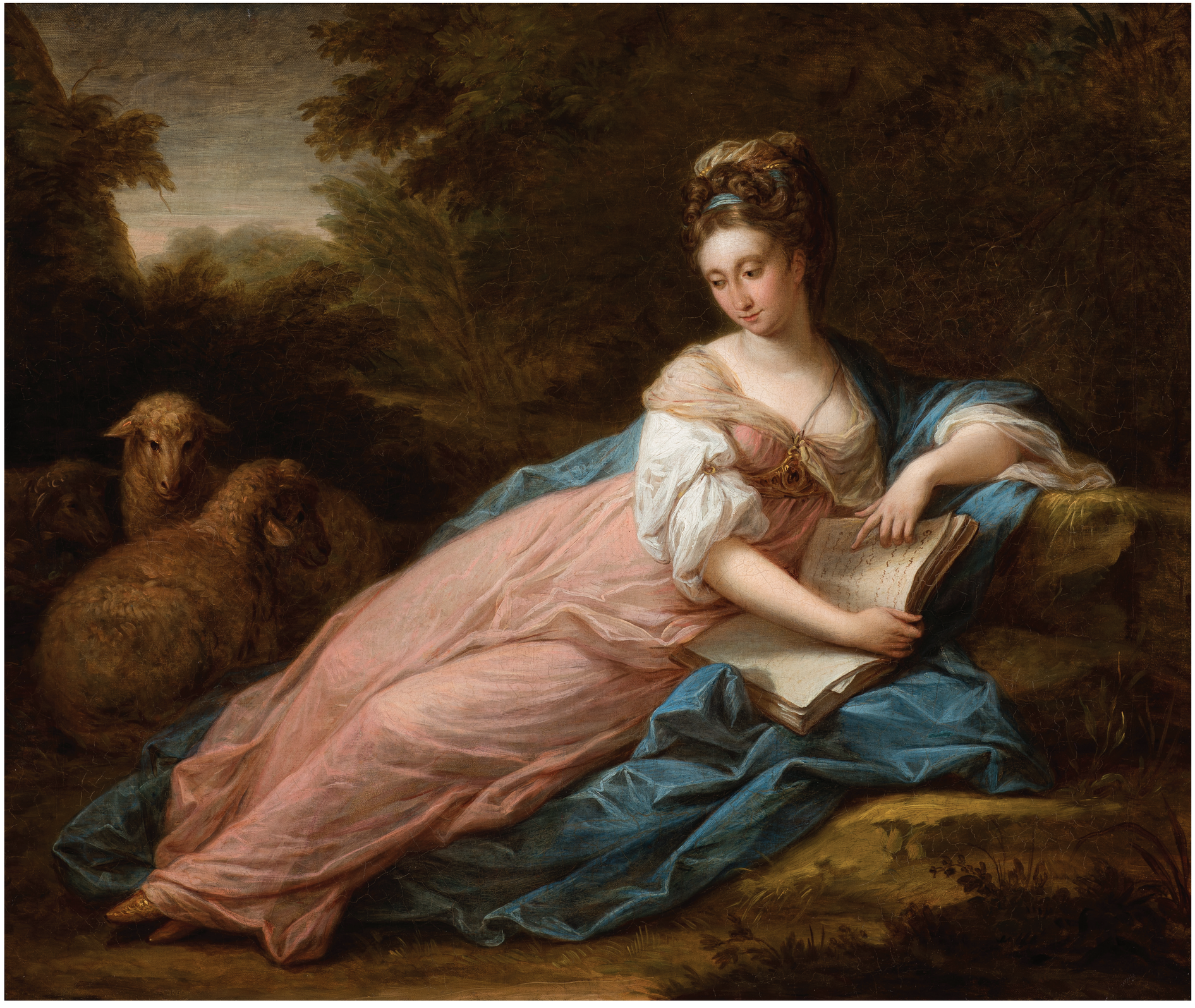

ANGELICA KAUFFMANN
Swiss, 1741–1807

A PORTRAIT OF MARY TISDAL READING
c. 1771–1772, oil on canvas, 24 3/4 x 29 3/4 in.