Mrs. Nesbitt as Circe, 1781
Oil on canvas
49\(\frac{3}{4}\) x 39\(\frac{1}{2}\) in. (125.1 x 100.3 cm)
Not signed or dated
Gift of Dwight W. Morrow, Jr., Anne Morrow Lindbergh,
class of 1928, and Constance Morrow Morgan, class of 1935
1958.4

Sir Joshua Reynolds, one of England's preeminent artists of the eighteenth century, was determined to elevate English art to the level of art on the Continent. This goal motivated his artistic vision, defined in his famous "Discourses on Art" delivered at the Royal Academy between 1769 and 1790. He believed that art was not mimetic but an expressive force filtered through the intellect, that art should strive for the universal rather than the particular, that history painting is the highest category of art, and, above all, that artists should learn by emulating masters of the past. His role as the first president of the Royal Academy provided him with the opportunity to create a climate in England receptive to his ideas and ambition. Reynolds's artistic reputation depends largely on his portraits. These exhibit a breadth of expression and interpretation often based on earlier artists such as Rembrandt van Rijn and Anthony van Dyck; Van Dyck's elegant portraits were especially popular during the second half of the eighteenth century. In 1781, the year Reynolds painted Mrs. Nesbitt as Circe, he traveled to Flanders to study the great seventeenth-century masters, especially Peter Paul Rubens and van Dyck.

In Mrs. Nesbitt as Circe, Reynolds confronts a fascinating sitter. Her mysterious early years, filled with rumors of an immoral past, would remain part of her allure. She became the mistress of Augustus John Harvey, third earl of Bristol, who was a confidant of George III. Harvey died in 1779, leaving her most of his estate, including a house in Notwood. Her proximity to the monarchy would engage her in affairs of state as a secret agent for the government during the momentous upheavals in Europe. She brought to the task well-honed attributes—especially her facility with men and languages.

Reynolds depicts Mrs. Nesbitt as Circe, daughter of the sun god Helios, who dwelt on the island of Aeaea to which she enticed men with wine and other delights, then turned them into docile animals by the touch of her wand. Reynolds made famous this type of portrait, in which the sitter is imbued with historical, mythological, or allegorical attributes. In this way he elevated portraiture, which was much in demand, close to the level of history painting, for which commissions were fewer. Here he depicts Lady Nesbitt seated in natural surroundings with a dominant tree behind her—a ubiquitous prop in eighteenth-century English portraits. Her simple white dress evokes classicizing drapery and underscores her pale features. Her carefully rendered face, beautiful and intelligent, glances out alertly at the viewer. Her pose and the animals around her define her powers and domain. In the right hand she holds her wand, and her left hand rests near the gilded goblet used for libations for her guests. As she crosses her left leg, she makes explicit the distinction between her space and ours.

The domesticated white cat, its paws in its mistress's lap, is further identified with her because it echoes her dress in color. The monkey, which in the eighteenth century was often associated with licentious behavior, may refer to her allegedly scandalous past. Like Circe on her isle, Mrs. Nesbitt presided over her estate at Norwood, where she charmed and impressed prominent men including the king. The tame leopard at the lower left may refer to this special company of powerful men, over whom she was able to manifest her will. In this extraordinarily erudite and refined portrait, Reynolds achieves his ambition of elevating English art to international stature.

Further Reading
THE SMITH COLLEGE MUSEUM OF ART

EUROPEAN AND AMERICAN PAINTING AND SCULPTURE 1760–1960

JOHN DAVIS AND JAROSLAW LEHKO

Introduction by Suzannah J. Fabing

HUDSON HILLS PRESS
NEW YORK

In Association with the Smith College Museum of Art, Northampton, Massachusetts