Joshua Reynolds. British, 1723-1792  
Mrs. Nesbitt as Circe. 1781  
Oil on canvas  
Gift of Dwight W. Morrow Jr., Anne Morrow Lindbergh, class of 1928, and Constance Morrow Morgan, class of 1935  
1958:4

The record books of Sir Joshua Reynolds, London’s leading portrait painter and the first president of the Royal Academy, show that Mary Nesbitt sat for her portrait in the spring of 1781. This is one of several paintings that resulted from these sessions. Reynolds sought to elevate portraiture to the stature of history painting, often including references to classical mythology in his portraits. Here, Mrs. Nesbitt is depicted as Circe, the beautiful enchantress of Homer’s *Odyssey* who had the power to turn men into captive animals. The goblet at her left holds the magic potion.

Even before the early death of her husband in 1775, Mrs. Nesbitt had become the mistress of the third Earl of Bristol. With her charm, beauty, and intelligence she was accepted into the circle of George III. Later she was involved in foreign policy and was active in diplomatic circles in Europe.