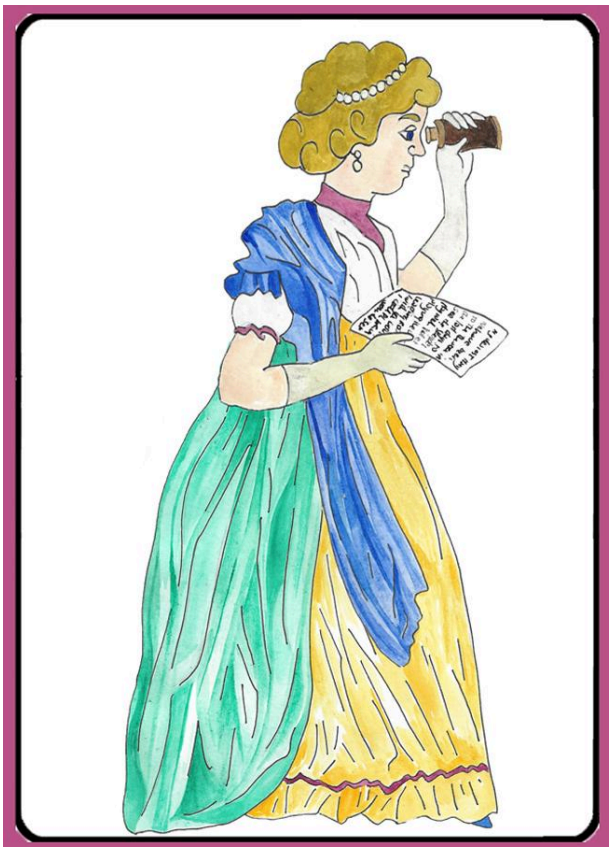
THE WIDOW

Mary Delany



The Widow's Position in Society

In eighteenth-century English society, widows who were considered *financially stable*, occupied a complex and unique social position shaped by both vulnerability and newfound autonomy. Unlike unmarried women, who were under the guardianship of their fathers or brothers, and married women, who were legally subject to their husbands, widows had a greater degree of social freedom and legal independence. Wealthy widows could gain social status through charitable activities, such as supporting churches, orphanages, schools, or other philanthropic ventures. These roles enabled them to establish a public presence that was both respected and deemed appropriate for women, as charitable work aligned with prevailing ideals of female virtue and care.

However, widowhood also brought significant societal pressures and expectations to maintain standards of respectability. Widows were expected to demonstrate modesty and chastity, as any perceived frivolity or *improper* relationships could damage their reputations. Remarriage was common, particularly for younger widows who were often still expected to defer to the head of her family. While remarriage offered practical benefits, providing social protection and financial security for either party, if it occurred soon, it could be seen as dishonouring the memory of the late husband.

Writing in *The Ladies Library* (1714) the young philosopher and cleric George Berkeley (1685-1753) offered advice to women on how to navigate the various stages of life, from spinsterhood to marriage, motherhood, and eventually widowhood. Notably, he stressed the importance of understanding one's own legal and financial rights over mastering household management, in order to prepare women for the potential responsibilities of widowhood.

NAME:	**Mary Delany (1700-1788) née Granville, aka Pendarves**
ORDER:	Widow
OCCUPATION:	English, Artist, Daughter, Plantswoman, Wife, Widow
RELATIONSHIPS:	1718: Married: Alexander Pendarves (1662-1725) 1743: Married: Patrick Delany (1686-1768)
CHILDREN:	None
NOTABLE WORKS:	1778: *A Catalogue of Plants Copyed from Nature in Paper Mosaic, finished in the year 1778.* Published anonymously
DEDICATIONS:	1791: Recognised in Erasmus Darwin's (1731-1802) *Loves of the Plants* part 2 of *The Botanic Garden: A Poem, in Two Parts*

Early Life and Education

Mary Granville's immediate family were not wealthy, however branches of the Granvilles held political power and influence, with notable connections at the highest levels of British society. Delany was educated at an exclusive school for young ladies run by Huguenot refugees, where she learnt English, French, history, music, dancing and needlework. Destined for a position at court, she was sent at the age of eight to live with her aunt Stanley at Whitehall. However, as supporters of the Jacobites, the family's allegiances came under suspicion following Queen Anne's death in 1714 and the succession of George I, together with the rise of the aristocratic Whig government.

Forced to leave London for a remote village in Gloucestershire, the Granvilles lived in greatly reduced circumstances. When Mary attracted the attention of a penniless young man, her family, hoping to end the relationship, her family accepted an invitation for her to join the Lansdowne household at Longleat in September 1717. It was there that Mary was introduced to Alexander Pendarves, a wealthy and childless 57-year-old MP who welcomed a match with her in hope that it would bring him an heir and strengthen his political alliance with Lansdowne. Like many other girls who were cynically sold into mercenary marriages with little regard for their future happiness or compatibility with their husbands, Mary was persuaded to marry Pendarves out of loyalty to her family and their pursuit of financial and political security. Writing in her journal on the night before her wedding:

> I had now nothing to do but submit to my unhappy fortune, and to endeavour to reconcile myself to it... I was married with *great pomp*. Never was wone drest out in gayer colours, and when I was led to the altar, I wished from my soul I had been led, as Iphigenia was, to be sacrificed. I was sacrificed. I lost, not life indeed, but I lost all that makes life desirable – joy and peace of mind.

Portrait of Mary Delany (1782) by John Opie (1761-1807). Image courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery London.

Marriage and Widowhood

Pendarves, who was thirty-eight years older than Mary, was a wealthy childless widower from an old Cornish landowning family. He was a close political ally of Landsdowne, but with Jacobite sympathies had damaged his social standing. Through Mary's connections, particularly her Stanley and Carteret cousins, he saw a route to social rehabilitation, while the marriage also offered the hope of securing an heir. For Mary's immediate family, the marriage promised financial security. Upon her marriage to a politician, like *The Political Aide*, Dorothy Cavendish-Bentink, 3rd Duchess of Portland (1750-1794) Mary was expected to support her husband's career; not through the active political campaigning undertaken by *The Mineralogist*, Georgiana Cavendish, 5th Duchess of Devonshire (1757-1806), but by serving as his hostess and social networker, helping to cement socio-political bonds in both Cornwall and London.

After seven years of marriage, Pendarves died. With no children to support, Mary was left financially secure, although her husband had not amended his will as he had promised, and she was by no means rich. Although pressured by her family to remarry, Mary enjoyed a degree of financial autonomy that secured her independence and chose to remain resolutely single. She spent time with her family, especially her sister Anne and with friends such as Sarah Chapone (1699-1764), Charles (1707-1788) and John Wesley (1703-1791) and Anne Donnellan (1702-1762).

In 1731 Mary and Anne travelled to Dublin to stay with Anne's sister and her husband. During this time Mary met two individuals who would become lifelong friends: Laetitia Bushe (1705-1757), a watercolourist and lady's companion much in demand for her wit and conversation, and the cleric and scholar Patrick Delany.

Second Chances

By 1734 Mary had returned to London and was happily established as a fashionable yet devout widow with a house sufficiently large to accommodate visits from her sister and her wide and diverse set of friends and correspondents. Life was to continue in this vein, with visits to her brother and her close childhood friend, *The Antiquarian*, Margaret Cavendish Bentinck, 2nd Duchess of Portland (1715-1785).

In the autumn of 1742, Mary received a proposal of marriage from the recently widowed Patrick Delany. Mary's family were circumspect in their approval of the offer: marriage to Delany was considered a step below her rank and at forty-two, any prospect of childbearing posed serious health risks. However, Mary was resolute, her earlier time in Ireland had been joyous, and together the couple arranged a settlement that allowed Mary to retain her house in London. In June 1743, Mary married for the second time, and the couple departed for Dublin to live at Delville where her life was filled with correspondence, drawing, embroidery and gardening.

In 1733 Delany's book *Revelation Examined with Candour* was published to critical acclaim. It provided the theological platform that later inspired Sarah Chapone's *The Hardships of the English Laws in Relation to Wives* (1735) , the first book to advocate sexual equality and legal equity for married women in terms of property. The publication reflects the shared intellectual and moral values that characterised Mary and Patrick's marriage, which was deeply rooted in friendship, religious reflection, and scholarly exchange.

The couple remained happily married in Ireland until Patrick's death some twenty five years later. At the age of sixty-eight, widowed for a second time Mary was again left with a modest income and returned to a small property in London. Her summers were spent at Bulstrode with her intimate friend *The Antiquarian,* Margaret Cavendish while in the winter she either remained at home or stayed at the houses of friends and relatives. Following Margaret's death, Mary's final years were spent living in Windsor supported by an annuity of £300 and a grace-and-favour cottage provided for her by *The King*, George III (1738-1820).

Female Friendship

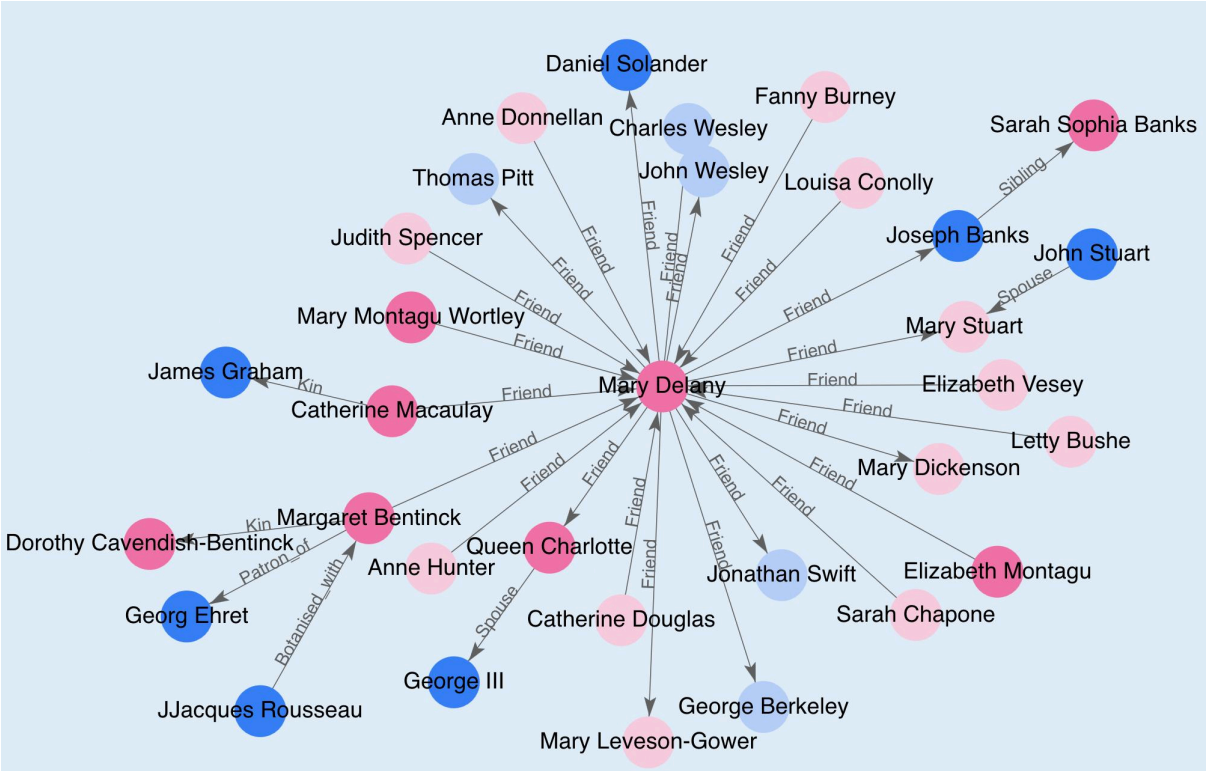
Mary was married twice. While her first marriage had been intensely unhappy, she found genuine contentment in her second. Yet in the Linnaean tradition of interpreting the 'homosexual' life of plants as a metaphor for the variety of human sexual relationships, Mary also maintained lifelong 'romantic' friendships with women, including Anne Donnellan, Letitia Bushe and Margaret Cavendish.

It has never been claimed that Mary's sexual orientation was lesbian. She did not adopt male clothing in her daily life, as did Charlotte Charke (1713–1760), nor did she engage in a formalised same-sex union like Anne Lister (1791–1840). Her orientation could instead be considered as uncertain or unfixed, occupying a space between erotic and non-erotic, formal and informal.

Between 1731-1733, during her travels in Ireland with Donnellan, Mary wrote a number of incisive letters expressing her preference for female companionship over heterosexual marriage and confessed to feelings of intense jealousy towards Frances Kelly, a rival Donnolan's affections. She also held liberal views on other women's relationships. Of her close friend, the talented amateur artist and lady's companion Letitia Bushe, she wrote admiringly, describing her as a woman who would not be shocked by "a woman whose relationship with another woman might be seen by some as contravening decorums."

In her later life, Mary became especially close to Margaret Cavendish through their shared experience of widowhood. From Mary's return to London in 1768, they spent every summer together at Bulstrode, where they organised their natural history collections and entertained friends. Through this friendship, Mary became a confidante of *The Queen,* Charlotte (1744-1818) who kept a miniature of Mary in her bedchamber.

Enamel pot with portraits of Elizabeth Robinson Montagu, Anne Donnellen, Mary Delany, and Margaret Cavendish.



Data visualisation: A selection of Mary's friends and correspondents.

Gardens

It has been suggested that Mary's 'queer' interests may have found expression through her landscape gardening. Garden design on Irish estates had been sorely neglected during the sixteenth-century largely due to the absenteeism of landlords and the prioritisation of land for cash income. However, as relative peace and prosperity settled over Ireland during the eighteenth century, a renewed interest in estate gardens emerged. Delany was more than grateful for his wife's keen interest and artistic input in improving his Delville estate.

Given Mary's evident delight in plants and gardens, it can be confidently assumed that she visited many of the most fashionable parks as part of her research during the 1740s and 1750s including that of *The Dilettante*, Francis Dashwood, 11th Baron Le Despencer's (1708-1781), at West Wycombe Park in Buckinghamshire, which was conveniently located near Bulstrode.

But West Wycombe was no ordinary landscape. If Delville represented a space of cultivated retreat, Dashwood's garden stood at the opposite end of the spectrum: provocative, theatrical, and overtly eroticised. It aligned with eighteenth-century conceptions of the landscape as a gendered space, imagined as a 'mistress' waiting to be tamed. Male garden designers saw the land as a feminine terrain to be shaped, penetrated and possessed, while Linnaean descriptions of flowers' reproductive parts, explicitly likened to female anatomy, reinforced this erotic framing. Dashwood's reputation for debauchery only heightened the effect, earning his estate the nickname of a 'ribald garden'; and while gardens frequently included grottoes to accommodate private retirement and lovers' assignations, West Wycombe Park pushed the metaphor further. Hills were deliberately sculpted to resemble a woman's breasts and belly with a vagina-like underground chamber opening onto the hillside. The park was openly joked about for its 'Venus Temple' and 'Venus Mound'.

It has been proposed that these features strongly influenced Mary when she designed the hermit's retreat at Delville. Even if not a conscious allusion to the notorious grounds of the Hell Fire Club's leader, the Delanys created what has been interpreted today as another ribald structure, an artistic exploration of both female intimacy and sexual anatomy.

The Beggar's Hut in the Gardens of Delville, Dublin (1745) by Mary Granville Delany, 1700-1788. Image courtesy of The National Gallery Ireland.

Paper Mosaicks: The New Art of Collage

Mary cut her first paper flower collage, or 'mosaick', in 1774 at Bulstrode; she went on to make over 985, and her *Flora Delanica* has become the best known contribution to women's art and craft of the century. Skilled at paper cutting from childhood, fashioning intricate silhouettes, and scenes from nature in vellum, Mary began by colouring her papers before cutting them into shapes which imitated the dried flowers in a *Hortus siccus.*

Once complete, she painstakingly recorded the botanical and common names of the plant on the back of her work, along with the date and source of the specimen. These were then entered into a 'catalogue': a series of ten folios, ordered using the Linnaean binomial Latin naming system, which had largely replaced the earlier long descriptive names for plants.

Occasionally incorporating actual plant material, Mary's reproductions were meticulous in their accuracy. *The Macaroni,* Sir Joseph Banks (1743-1820), Director of the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew, declared them "the only imitations of nature" he had seen, from which he could "describe botanically any plant without the least fear of committing an error."

Unlike scientific botanical illustrations however, Mary did not illustrate the plant's reproductive organs, perhaps out of a need to preserve the *modesty* of her compositions. Nevertheless, the influence of *The Artist,* Georg Ehret (1708-1770), a frequent guest at Bulstrode, is clear; her life-size blooms are cut with precise perspective, combining both aesthetic and scientific value. Meanwhile, the collages are also reminiscent of continental flower painters Jan van Huysum (1682-1749) and Barbara Regina Dietzsch (1706-1783) who also used a dark background to show the vibrant colours of flowers to their best advantage.

Mary Delany's paper mosaik of Passiflora (1777) alongside a painting of the same plant by Barbara Dietzsch.

Botanical Network

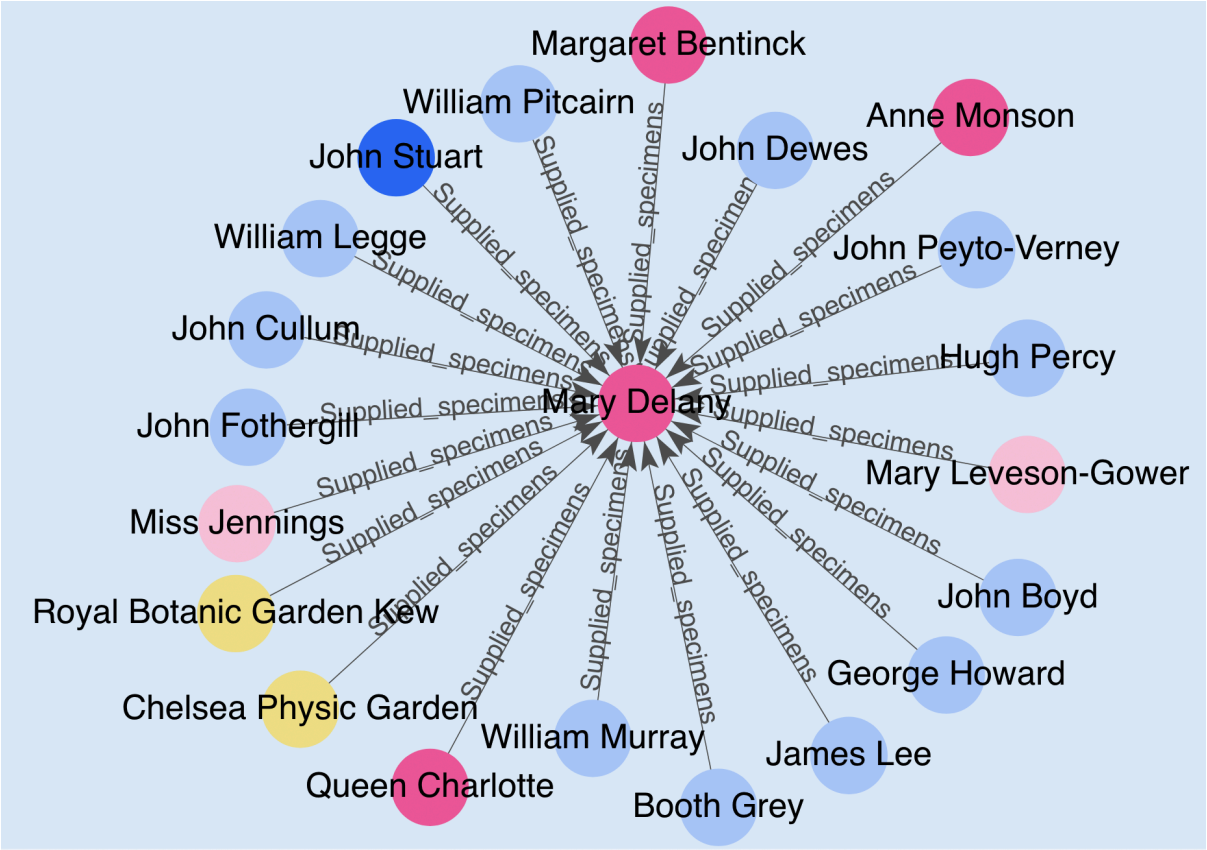
As a friend or correspondent of many of the most important scientific, literary and artistic figures of her time, Mary was able to gather flowers from the gardens the nobility. Frequent contributors included *The Politician*, John Stuart 3rd Earl of Bute (1713-1792) and Hugh Percy, 1st Duke of Northumberland (1714-1786), whose private gardens at Luton Hoo and Sion House were among the best stocked in the country. She also selected specimens from the Chelsea Physic Garden. The King and Queen took a strong personal interest in her skills, and through her friendship with Banks, she was given access to plants from the royal collection. What had begun as a leisure pastime, became a pursuit for novel specimens; in hunting for new subjects, she also visited *The Vineyard*, the nursery run by Bank's friend James Lee, father of *The Daughter*, Ann Lee (1753-1790), and said to be second only to Kew in its variety of plants.

As public interest in Mary's work grew, visitors came to Bulstrode to view her catalogue and she taught both men and women her techniques. So great was the attention she attracted that *The Poet,* Erasmus Darwin (1731-1802) mentions her and her followers in his epic poem, *The Loves of the Plants* (1789).

Loves of the Plants. A Poem.

So now DELANY forms her mimic bowers,
Her paper foliage, and her silken flowers;
Her virgin train the tender scissars ply,
Vein the green leaf, the purple petal dye:
Round wiry stems the flaxen tendril bends,
Moss creeps below, and waxen fruit impends.
Cold Winter views amid his realms of snow
DELANY'S vegetable statues blow;
Smooths his stern brow, delays his hoary wing,
And eyes with wonder all the blooms of spring.

[*So now Delany*. l. 155. Mrs. Delany has finished nine hundred and seventy accurate and elegant representations of different vegetables with the parts of their flowers, fructification, &c. according with the classification of Linneus, in what she terms paper-mosaic. She began this work at the age of 74, when her sight would no longer serve her to paint, in which she much excelled; between her age of 74 and 82, at which time her eyes quite failed her, she executed the curious Hortus siccus above-mentioned, which I suppose contains a greater number of plants than were ever before drawn from the life by any one person. Her method consisted in placing the leaves of each plant with the petals, and all the other parts of the flowers, on coloured paper, and cutting them with scissars accurately to the natural size and form, and then parting them on a dark ground; the effect of which is wonderful, and their accuracy less liable to fallacy than drawings. She is at this time (1788) in her 89th year, with all the powers of a fine understanding still unimpaired. I am informed another very ingenious lady, Mrs. North, is constructing a similar Hortus siccus, or Paper-garden; which she executes on a ground of vellum with such elegant taste and scientific accuracy, that it cannot fail to become a work of inestimable value.]



Data visualisation: Suppliers of flowers used in Delany's paper mosaiks.

Propriety

For all her connections and the respect she commanded in society, Mary remained constrained by her gender and by the ongoing debate over the propriety of women's study of botany following the introduction of Linnaeus's sexual system of classification. At seventy-eight, there was little pressure on Delany to assert her botanical knowledge publicly, and yet her *Catalogue of Plants Copyed from Nature in Paper Mosaic* (1778), listing around six hundred specimens, was anonymously and privately published in a gesture to avoid controversy and preserve decorum. Her botanical work, though widely admired, remained carefully framed within the acceptable bounds of genteel domestic sociability.

This careful navigation of social boundaries extended beyond a public display of her botanical knowledge into the realm of personal association, particularly when faced with figures whose reputations threatened the equilibrium she had so diligently maintained.

Delany also moved in the same circles as the celebrated Genevan, *The Philosopher*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778). Though their connection was indirect, through her brother Bernard, who was Rousseau's neighbour, and her close friend Margaret Cavendish, who offered him refuge and patronage at Bulstrode, their proximity was notable. Despite this, Delany declined to meet Rousseau. His ideas on society, education, and human nature, though intellectually influential, were also seen as radical and potentially subversive by the English elite. For Delany, the preservation of her carefully cultivated reputation was paramount. To be seen entertaining or even conversing with such a controversial a figure, known for his passionate writings, unconventional views, and turbulent personal life, risked inviting gossip and social suspicion and her refusal to meet him was a pragmatic decision shaped by the rigid expectations placed upon women of her status. While friends and family may have been intrigued by Rousseau's presence, Delany, ever attuned to the delicate balance between intellectual engagement and public perception, chose to protect her image. Her decision speaks volumes about the constraints women of her era navigated in pursuing intellectual life while maintaining societal respectability.

Fashion

Mary frequently wrote about fashion and described the costumes worn by the guests at the various balls she attended. In the mid 1770s, the same time as she began her *Hortus siccus* paper siccus, she wore a dress embroidered with the most accurately detailed flowers of the period. While floral embroidery was a popular theme for embroidery, what is unusual about this dress is the colour choice of a black background. Mary would no longer be expected to wear mourning for her late husband, and in the candlelit evening entertainments it would not have shimmered in the same way that lighter colours did. What it did however, was reflect the coloured backgrounds and aesthetic of her paper mosaics, subtly signalling her botanical interests in a manner that was both personal and socially acceptable.

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Detail from Delany's 1770's black embroidered dress. From Mrs Delany and Her Circle, the catalogue of an exhibition of the same name, edited by Mark Laird and Alicia Weisberg-Roberts, Yale Centre for British Art (2009)

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