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Essays by William H. Gerdts and Roxanne M. Stanulis

John Hesselius (1728/29–1778)

215 *Anna Dorothea Finney*, ca. 1758

oil on canvas

h. 48 in., w. 37 ¼ in.

published: Sweeney, "Paintings from the Biggs Collection," p. 892, pl. 2

JOHN HESSELIUS, son of noted portraitist Gustavus Hesselius (1682–1755), was one of the most successful native-born American painters of the colonial period.¹ He probably was born in Philadelphia and received his earliest training from his father. By 1750 he had established himself as a portraitist based in Philadelphia but worked as an itinerant in Maryland, Delaware, and Virginia. He settled in Anne Arundel County, Maryland, around 1760. He painted fewer portraits after his 1763 marriage to Mary Young Woodward, a wealthy widow living near Annapolis. He worked in Virginia in the early 1770s, and his last known painting is dated 1777.

The portrait of Anna Dorothea Finney dates from Hesselius's early mature period, when he was deeply influenced by British portraitist John Wollaston, who worked in Maryland and Virginia during the 1750s. Hesselius imitated Wollaston's two most notable stylistic conventions: distinctive almond-shaped eyes, and an emphasis on delineating the rich textures of the subject's attire, in this case her blue satin dress. The three-quarter-length format, which accommodated such accessories as the landscape background and stone ledge, was the largest size portrait that Hesselius offered to his clients. Finney's conventional pose was probably derived from a British mezzotint engraving, and the flower that she holds was a common attribute of femininity.

Anna Dorothea Finney (1735–1817) grew up in New Castle, Delaware, the daughter of a wealthy physician and landowner of Irish descent named John Finney and his first wife Elizabeth (née French), and lived in Amstel House, an eighteenth-century Georgian mansion (now one of New Castle's main tourist attractions), which her father had built in 1738.² According to one source Anna fell in love with a young British officer. When he was killed in the French and Indian War, she resolved never to wed. Her father had other ideas and arranged her marriage to her first cousin John Finney, a farmer, justice of the peace, and elder in the Presbyterian Church in New London Township, in Chester County, Pennsylvania. In her later years Mrs. Finney became "a high and haughty dame, exercising centurion-like authority, prone to the issuing of orders and very vigilant and very determined in seeing that they were promptly and vigorously executed." When her son John Finney moved from New Castle to western Pennsylvania during the early nineteenth century, this portrait was "carried, wrapped around a flagstaff, across the mountains by a rider on horseback."³ The portrait thereafter descended to John's daughter Anna Dorothea Logan, to her daughter Emma Logan, and then to her cousin Robert Finney.

RWT

¹ Doud, "Hesselius: His Life and Work"; Doud, "Hesselius, Maryland Limner."

² Delaware Federal Writers' Project, *New Castle on the Delaware*, p. 86. For biographical information on the sitter's father, see Bendler, *Colonial Delaware Assemblymen*, p. 41.

³ Keen, *Descendants of Jöran Kym*, p. 17–18.