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## Artist and Model: Joanna Mary Boyce's *Mulatto Woman*

Recently, a small painting by Joanna Mary Boyce appeared on the market in London. An apparently minor though beautiful work, it is in fact a fascinating document of the mid-Victorian avant-garde. *Head of a Mulatto Woman* (Fig. 1), painted on paper laid on linen, is signed and dated 1861, and measures 6 3/4" x 5 3/8". Unsold during the artist's lifetime, it was also unexhibited before her death, being a study related to the painting *A Sybil* (Fig. 2), which was incomplete when Boyce died unexpectedly in July 1861 after giving birth to her second child. The *Head* was shown posthumously, however, in 1901, 1923, 1935, and 1937.<sup>1</sup>

Joanna Mary Boyce was working on several pictures in the second half of 1860. An exhibitor at London galleries since 1855 (Nunn, *Victorian Women Artists*, 146-58), at the Royal Academy that year she had shown her first history painting, *The Child's Crusade*, which had been skied and was therefore not widely noticed. Undaunted, she prepared equally ambitious paintings for the next year: a Venetian head-and-shoulders work of her friend Charlotte Ridley (*La Veneziana*); the figure of a working woman in a landscape (*Heather-gatherer, Hindhead*); a domestic scene showing her small son Sidney being dandled on a maid's knees, the mother looking on playfully from the background (*Peep-bo!*); and a single-figure scene of heroic mood showing a standing woman, of ambiguous race but clearly non-European, leafing through scrolls that she takes down from an altar-like shelf before her. While this last work was never finished and therefore did not accompany the other three paintings to the 1861 RA exhibition, it became known as *A Sybil* in obituarists' accounts of the prematurely dead painter's unfulfilled promise. Picked out by the *Athenaeum's* correspondent as "amongst the finest of these (unfinished paintings) . . . masterly and grandly mysterious and weird-like,"<sup>2</sup> this painting, even though incomplete, evidently embodied for many the spirit of the young painter, whom the *Spectator's* reviewer called "the Elizabeth Browning of painting."<sup>3</sup>

The model for *A Sybil* was Mrs. Eaton, whose likeness can be recognized easily in *Head of a Mulatto*

*Woman*, though here she is given a sophisticated aspect with braided hair and earrings. (It is not known, of course, whether the artist had any imaginative title in mind for this painting, or whether she saw it as a straightforward portrait.) She can be seen, too, in the artist's sketchbook for 1860-61, where ideas for the *Sybil* include a massive figure seated on a chair and gazing meditatively off to the right, a figure seated on the ground with her arms around her drawn-up legs, and a standing figure reaching towards an apparent altar, similar to the final version. There is also a head study, in which Mrs. Eaton looks distinctly Pre-Raphaelite, insofar as she evokes Rossetti's characterizations of Jane Morris as enigmatic muse.<sup>4</sup> Amongst notes in Boyce's sketchbooks on the development of the work she had in hand in the late months of 1860, there is one entry which clearly concerns the *Head of a Mulatto Woman*: "Small head of Mrs. Eaton—on white hot pressed paper sketched in pencil carefully outlined black and firm—then scrubbed all over background and flesh transparent greenish brown. Laid in background quickly[,] flesh dragged all over unequally[,] 1st madder brown—then raw sienna with cobalt and black for grey half-shades with madder brown in shadows and pencilling of feature[,] then with largish brush laid in the broad flesh color with a tint composed of madder brown, raw sienna and Naples yellow varied with madder[,] carmine and white. Have painted with transparent color only, rubbed in - Nov. 60."<sup>5</sup> An exercise such as this—a small-scale head painted in oil on paper—was already a hallmark of Boyce's oeuvre. Closely comparable with *Head of a Mulatto Woman* are her earlier works such as *Little Red-haired Boy* (1853, 5 1/2" x 4 1/2"), *Laughing Boy* (1856, 6 1/2" x 6 1/2") and *Head of a Girl* (undated, 9" x 8 1/4"), although these are arguably less serious works insofar as their subjects are children.

While Mrs. Eaton's biography is as yet unestablished, she was evidently a respected model among progressive artists of the 1860s, for her distinctive features are recognizable in contemporary works by other avant-garde painters connected with Boyce. One such is Rebecca Solomon's *A Young Teacher*, which appeared at Henry Wallis' French Gallery at the 1861