FINDING SIR ROWLAND…A NEW IDENTITY FOR A PORTRAIT MINIATURE BY JOHN SMART

JUNE 29, 2023



In 2014, the Philip Mould Gallery staged an exhibition of a single owner collection of forty-five portrait miniatures by John Smart (1741-1811) (Fig.1). Working with Lawrence Hendra, we scoured original birth and marriage certificates and read lists of all those who travelled to India while Smart worked there for a decade from 1785. Here we discovered that Smart was not born in Norfolk as previously assumed, but was instead a London boy – hailing from Soho and possibly the son of a peruke

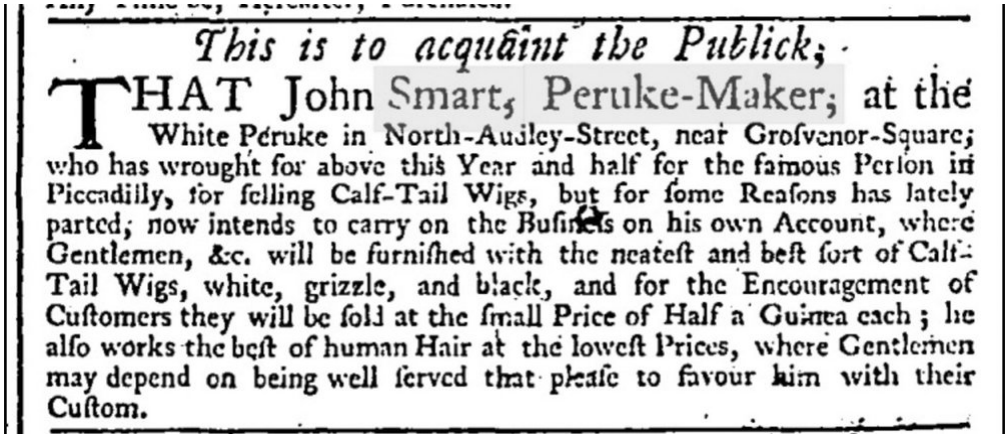
(wig) maker (which possibly explains his attention to the detail of his sitter's hairstyles) (Fig.2). We also fact-checked Daphne Foskett's 1964 biography and discovered that Smart's personal life was somewhat erratic compared to the steady success of his professional life.[1]



Fig. 1

Image of the 2014 Exhibition 'John Smart; A Genius Magnified', held at the Philip Mould Gallery, Dover Street, London.

Lawrence and I paid the same attention to detail to the sitters in the collection. Scanning the multiple files in the Witt Library next to the Courtauld Gallery of Art, we were able to give many sitters back their lost identity. This work also included attempting to match the sitter's with the drawings Smart prepared in advance of painting his miniatures. But there is always more to discover in the art world – and in checking a Christie's sale catalogue of the 1960s I saw a familiar face staring back at me in black and white. When I read the description, I discovered that the first miniature we included in the exhibition catalogue – an exceptional and early work by the artist – had a name.


This is to acquaint the Publick;

THAT John Smart, Peruke-Maker, at the White Peruke in North-Audley-Street, near Groſvenor-Square; who has wrought for above this Year and half for the famous Perſon in Piccadilly, for ſelling Calf-Tail Wigs, but for ſome Reaſons has lately parted; now intends to carry on the Buſineſs on his own Account, where Gentlemen, &c. will be furniſhed with the neateſt and beſt ſort of Calf-Tail Wigs, white, grizzle, and black, and for the Encouragement of Cuſtomers they will be ſold at the ſmall Price of Half a Guinea each; he alſo works the beſt of human Hair at the loweſt Prices, where Gentlemen may depend on being well ſerved that pleaſe to favour him with their Cuſtom.

Fig. 2 Daily Advertiser on 12 and 17 November 1744, showing an advertisement by John Smart's father, also called John. It appears that John Smart was born 20 January 1741, baptised 24 January 1741 to a John Smart and Mary, at St Luke's, Old

Street, Finsbury.

The miniature had in fact come directly from the collection of 4th Baron St. Oswald of Nostell (1916-1984), descended through the family of the man who had built Nostell Priory (now National Trust). It was mysteriously withdrawn on the day of the sale, so there is still further work on the provenance to discover where it had been between the sale and a German dealer named Karin Henninger-Tavcar, who sold it to a private collector in 1990. Wherever the miniature had been, it was now known to be of Sir Rowland Winn (1739-1785).



Fig. 3

John Smart (1741-1811), portrait of Sir Rowland Winn, 5th Bt. (1739-1785), dated 1767.

- The Limner Company

This particular miniature by John Smart had stood out in the collection which arrived at the Philip Mould gallery in 2014. Unusually well painted for this early year in Smart's career, the sitter was also wearing exceptionally striking clothing of a pink coat, lined with lilac silk and trimmed with gold brocade, contrasting with a surprising bright blue waistcoat trimmed with the same ostentatious brocade. The lilac lining also matched the sitter's hair, which had been powdered with a grey-lilac hue. Smart's forensic attention to detail was evident in the miniscule knots which lined the length of the black silk ribbon used to tie the sitter's ponytail. The sitter was clearly confident and fashionable – and undeniably rich.

Sir Rowland Winn, the sitter in the Smart portrait, was also painted by the Irish Hugh Douglas Hamilton (1739/40-1808) in the same year.[2] Here Sir Rowland wears an equally striking outfit of red jacket, pale turquoise waistcoat with gold brocade and yellow breeches. His wife, Sabine Louise d'Hervart (1734 -1798), stands next to him in an ermine-trimmed satin gown. The couple were painted in their newly-built home, Nostell Priory, and are shown in the library designed by Robert Adam with various pieces of furniture, including the important library table made by Thomas Chippendale. It is likely that the miniature by Smart was commissioned by Sir Rowland for his wife to wear. Their marriage had met with much opposition, with Sir Rowland's family concerned with family reputation as Sabine was not only a widow but Swiss (i.e. foreign) to boot.



Fig. 4 Hugh Douglas Hamilton RHA (1739/40-1808), portrait of Sir Rowland Winn, 5th Bt (1739 - 1785) and his wife Sabine Louise d'Hervart (1734 -1798), c.1767-8. National Trust, Nostell Priory.

A neighbour, Catherine Cappe, claimed that 'the peace of the [Winn] family' was 'entirely destroyed' by the return of the newlyweds to Yorkshire. Sabine herself was very unhappy in Yorkshire, which she described as 'one of the most desolate and gloomy corners of the universe'. The couple also had a house in St. James's Square, London and Sir Rowland may have been introduced to the young John Smart there.

Sabine was also a pioneering textile artist, which may also explain her husband's remarkable outfit. Left alone for long periods at Nostell, she used unconventional fabrics for her own clothes (and possibly her husband's), covered expensive Chippendale chairs in avantgarde styles and produced her own 'dressed' prints using experimental fabrics (fig.5). Sabine broke with social convention in conversing and corresponding directly with tradespeople, making her a pioneer in craft as an aristocratic woman of the 1760s.[3]



Fig. 5

A ‘dressed’ print by Sabine Winn (Nostell Priory, Yorkshire, National Trust).

The fact that this portrait remained in the family for almost two hundred years is testament to the importance of miniatures as highly personal works of art. It is also testament to Winn’s patronage of the most highly regarded artists and craftsmen – including Hugh Douglas Hamilton, Robert Adam and Thomas Chippendale. He chose to take a risk on the (then) little-known artist for his most intimate portrait, but it appears this was well-justified, as Smart clearly delivered one of the most highly-detailed and captivating portraits of his career.

1] Smart’s first wife, Marianne Howard, eloped to Rome with the artist William Pars, leaving Smart to raise their two daughters and possibly a third child, who likely died young. After this, Smart married a further two times, fathering a total of six children over the course of his various relationships.

2] For more on this portrait see A. Laing, 'Sir Rowland and Lady Winn: A Conversation Piece in the Library at Nostell Priory' Apollo, April 2000, pp.14-18.

3] For more on the fascinating Sabine, listen to curator Serena Dyer’s podcast (https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/history/ecc/archive/emforum/projects/brieflives/sabinne_winn/) or read her book, Women Makers and Consumer Culture in the 18th Century, published by Bloomsbury in 2021.