

THE LIMNER COMPANY



Henry Pierce Bone (1779 - 1855)

Portrait of Lady Emma Hamilton (née Emily Lyon) (1765-1815), formerly called 'Ariadne'[1] or 'Absence'; 1835

Circa: 1835

The reverse signed, dated and inscribed, 'London Feb 1835/Painted by Henry Pierce Bone Enamel/Painter to her Majesty and their Royal Highness/the Duchess of Kent and Princess Victoria/From the Original by Romney in the/Collection of Joseph Neels Esq. M.P'.

Gilded wood frame with beaded border, inner velvet mount, the reverse hinged to reveal counter-enamel.

This ambitious enamel by Henry Pierce Bone, eldest son and pupil of Henry Bone, is copied from an oil by George Romney. This painting was still in the artist George Romney's studio at his death, and reveals perhaps the depth of feeling that he had for Emma, whom he had painted so often.

Born to blacksmith Henry Lyon and his wife Mary, Emma had her first child at the age of sixteen after becoming the mistress of Sir Harry Fetherstonhaugh, Bt. (1754 -1846). Through determination and using her new society connections, she moved to London as the mistress of Hon. Charles Francis Greville (1749-1809) and met Romney for the first time in 1782. Soon, Emma preoccupied his painting practice, sitting to him well over 100 times between 1782-86.[1] The painting remained in Romney's studio until after his death, when it was listed by one of his assistants as 'Absence', and was bought in at his studio sale for retention by his son and biographer, John Romney. The artist probably finished it after Emma left England in 1786, it likely reflects his own complex feelings for her effective 'banishment' abroad.

Emma finally achieved social respectability through her marriage to Sir William Hamilton, one of the great connoisseur-scholars of his time, who described her as more beautiful than 'anything found in nature; and finer in her particular way than anything that is to be found in antique art'. The artist's son,

John Romney, observed that 'in the characters in which she has been represented, she sat only for the face and a slight sketch of the attitude; and the drapery was painted either from models or from the layman'.

Emma is of course also famed for her passionate love affair with Horatio Nelson (1758-1805), whom she first met in September 1793. It was not until 1798 that their infamous love affair began. He arrived in Naples a battered war hero and Emma was immediately theatrical in her displays of affection for him. Their affair began a few months later and while Sir William did express concern for the scandal, he accepted the relationship and himself was very fond of Nelson. When Sir William died in 1803 it was with both Emma and Nelson at his side. Ten years after Nelson's death at Trafalgar, Emma died in penury and ill health on 15th January 1815.

[1] In the 19th century, the original painting became known as 'Lady Hamilton as Ariadne' since it was thought to show Emma posing as this daughter of King Minos of Crete, who helped Theseus to escape from the Minotaur's labyrinth only to be abandoned by him on the island of Naxos.

[2] <https://www.npg.org.uk/whatson/exhibitions/2002/george-romney/emma-hamilton> - accessed 10 April 2024