



JOHN SMART (1742 - 1811)

Portrait miniature of a Gentleman, wearing coat and frilled shirt, his hair worn en queue

Circa: c.1775

c.1775

Watercolour and pencil on paper

Mounted and framed (gilded wood)

Oval, 54mm (2 3/8in) high (portrait only); frame 6in x 5in

Recent research by Victoria and Albert Museum conservators suggests that many of these small oval drawings by Smart were preparatory studies for portraits on ivory and originally rectangular. These were probably left in Smart's studio after his death and later sold, cut down and framed like oval miniatures.

Many were passed down through the generations and eventually sold in the 20th century at auction – most being snapped up by major dealers like Agnews and Spink & Son. This was a clever move, as Smart's drawings have been universally appreciated ever since – even though they were never intended as finished works of art.

Originally Smart's patrons would be paying for the miniature (the finished watercolour on ivory portrait) and only had to have sittings for a sketch, such as the one of the gentleman here. Often these sketches offer valuable information, such as colour notes and, most helpfully, the name of the sitter. Smart's final miniatures were so finely painted that they must have taken considerable time. It made sense for him to take time over these, but release the patron from a lengthy initial sitting.

This elegant graphite drawing, tinted lightly with a watercolour wash, shows an unknown gentleman from the early decades of his career, when he was painting mainly the wealthy merchant classes and building contacts with the East India Company employees ahead of his ten year sojourn in Madras. As the miniature counterpart cannot be found in archive records, the sitter is currently unknown.

