THE LIMNER COMPANY



JOHN SMART (1742 - 1811)

Portrait miniature of a Lady, wearing pale blue dress, white lace cap under black lace and black lace shawl

Circa: 1768

1768

Watercolour on ivory (licence LTA24TK9)

Oval, 1 5/8in (42mm) high

Signed with initials and dated ‘JS/ 1768’

Gold locket frame

This delicately rendered portrait of a lady by John Smart likely shows the sitter in mourning. The pale blue dress and black lace used as a shawl and to cover the head were typical garments for mourning dress of the later eighteenth century. While there were no fixed rules for mourning at this period, the combination of black lace over a white indoor cap and the wearing of muted colours – particularly blue and lilac – seem to have been observed for a period of around a year for the death of a spouse. Even before Queen Victoria famously mourned in deep black after the death of Prince Albert in 1861, the royal court stated that certain guidelines should be observed. For example, after the death of Queen Victoria’s father, the Duke of Kent, in 1820 the court were told ‘ladies to wear black azins, plain muslin or long lawn, crape hoods, chamois shoes and gloves, and crape fans. Undress.—Dark Norwich crape. The gentlemen to wear black cloth, without buttons on the sleeves or pockets, plain muslin or long lawn cravats and weepers, chamois shoes and gloves, crape hatbands, and black swords and buckles. Undress.—Dark grey frocks.’

Smart’s sitter here is also a contrast to the men and women he was painting during the later 1760s. At this point, in the first decade of his career, many of Smart’s commissions came from the nobility [1]. His originality and ability to capture the vibrant clothing of the period appear to have been appreciated by

those wealthy enough to enjoy high fashion – perhaps most notably Sir Rowland Winn, 5th Bt (1739-1785), who was portrayed by Smart the year before the present work in vibrant lilac-lined pink brocaded jacket [2].

The intimacy of the present portrait suggests that the sitter might even have been a family member in mourning – perhaps Smart's sister Deborah (b.1736), or his mother, who may have still been dressed modestly after the death of her husband in 1764 [3]. However, as Smart's fellow artist Ozias Humphry remarked, his miniatures offered an 'exactness' painted 'without any flattery', and the sitter may have been a widow, whose name is now lost to us [4]. Smart's genius as an artist was certainly in his observation of minutiae – from the textures of fabric to the expression of his sitters – nothing escaped the scrutiny of his brush.

[1] See Emma Rutherford; Lawrence Hendra; Lindsay Stainton; Haydn Williams, John Smart, A Genius Magnified, Philip Mould Gallery Exhibition Catalogue, 2014, catalogue numbers 1-5.

[2] Previously with The Limner Company, now National Trust, Nostel Priory.

[3] Smart's origins are still uncertain, however research by Lawrence Hendra (Philip Mould Gallery) found the most likely candidate to be a John Smart born on 20 January 1742 and baptized on 24 January at St Luke, Old Street, Finsbury, the son of John Smart (d. 1764), peruke maker, and his wife Mary, née Day.

[4] Ozias Humphry MSS, 8 vols., 1774–1810, HU 3/49 (Royal Academy).