THE LIMNER COMPANY



JOHN DOWNMAN (1749 - 1824)

Portrait miniature of an Officer depicted in the dress uniform of a British infantry officer of 'field rank'

Circa: Circa 1797-1810

Circa 1797-1810

Watercolour on ivory

Ivory licence number: XUUG1VA2

Gold frame, the reverse with ornate hairwork and a ribbon of pearls

Oval, 2 ¾ in (70mm) high

Downman was born in Ruabon, North Wales, the son of Francis Downman, an attorney of Devonshire stock, and his wife Charlotte, daughter of Francis Goodsend, the private secretary to George I. He was closely associated with the foundation of the Royal Academy – in 1768 John became a pupil of Benjamin West (who remained something of a hero for Downman throughout his life) and attended the RA Schools from 17 March 1769 and then exhibited 148 works at the Royal Academy between 1770 and 1819. He was elected an Associate of the Royal Academy, 2 November 1795.

Portraiture was certainly a lucrative route for an artist and after travels in Italy, he established himself as a portrait painter in Cambridge in 1776. By 1778 he was working in London, where the aristocratic and fashionable flocked to his studio. This was to be the mainstay of his career – his brilliance in capturing faces and fleeting fashions proving vastly popular for his growing patronage.

Downman is best known his ability to capture a likeness using his unique blend of black chalk and stump over graphite, with highlights of watercolour on both sides of his favoured wove paper. Using chalk, he could also take an impression of each portrait and over time built up albums of his portraits, which he called 'first studies'.[1] Far rarer are his watercolour portrait miniatures – of which the present

work is one – which show his ability to capture detail in a different medium without losing his characteristic technique.

The present example is particularly vivid in colour and almost perfectly preserved. Although we are unable to identify the sitter, the uniform described as of ' field rank' means that he was either a major, lieutenant-colonel or colonel: this is denoted by the fact that he is shown wearing two epaulettes. Likewise, his regiment cannot be determined but it was one of the many which wore white 'facings' (collar, cuffs and lapels) on their coats and whose officers' dress coats were embellished with silver lace. There will have been a regimental designation on his buttons but this is not visible in the portrait. He may not necessarily have been an officer of a regular British line infantry regiment but possibly one of Militia or Volunteers.[2] On the outbreak of war with Revolutionary France in 1793, most British Counties raised units of auxiliary military forces in response. There were therefore many units of volunteers and it seems that the men who joined them also commissioned portraits of themselves in their uniforms.

[1] These 'first studies' are now preserved in albums in the British Museum (London) and Fitzwilliam Museum (Cambridge).

[2] With thanks to Stephen Wood of Stephen Wood Research for his assistance with the uniform of the sitter https://www.britishportraits.org.uk/expertise/stephen-wood/ .