THE LIMNER COMPANY



SAMUEL SHELLEY (1750/56 - 1808)

Portrait miniature of a Young Lady, in blue dress with white see-through fichu, black choker and blue sky background with distant trees

Circa: Circa 1780

Circa 1780

Watercolour on ivory

Ivory registration number: WGBWM5TE

Oval, 45mm (1.7in) high

Samuel Shelley was one of the most ambitious and versatile portrait miniaturists and watercolourist in 18th century England. He painted in oil, illustrated books and engraved several of his own works. Born in Whitechapel, London, Shelley was for the most part a self-taught artist. Her followed a relatively orthodox route into his chosen career; first exhibiting at the Society of Artists at only fourteen in 1773 (where he won a coveted prize), entering the Royal Academy Schools the next year in March 1774. He began exhibiting frequently in the R.A between 1774-1804.

Shelley's work rivalled the most vaunted artists of his day, including his own hero Sir Joshua Reynolds. He was an experimental artist, working in numerous mediums and styles, often using larger size ivory and displaying them in an unconventional way, for example horizontally. He also often broke free from traditional portrait miniature, demonstrating his originality through painting subject pictures (see The Limner Company, Samuel Shelley, A Lady Sleeping, c.1785). His watercolour oeuvre however is most impressive in terms of its sensitivity and high level of romanticism in his portraits, stylistically comparable to contemporary miniaturists Richard Crosse (1742-1810), John Smart (1741-1811) and more specifically Richard Cosway (1742-1821).

Shelley played a crucial role and was an important voice in the history of the Royal Watercolour Society[1] (1805-55), continuously advocating for the medium, believing watercolours should be given

their own forum and exhibition space in order to be properly appreciated. He even became treasurer for the society until 1807. Before the formation of such a society, watercolours could only be shown next to oils at the conventional exhibition spaces of the Society of Artists or Royal Academy. This new separation from brightly coloured, large oil paintings allowed watercolours to be viewed among paintings in the same media and heralded a new admiration of such work. This did not mean that he was unaware of developments in oil paintings, with Sir Joshua Reynolds remaining a constant inspiration.

This portrait miniature was once part of the collection of renowned collector and dealer Giuseppe Rossi (1914-1989). His singular interest was the evolution of European decorative arts through the 18th century, from the Baroque to Neoclassicism, with a specific focus on northern Italy and France. He developed an extensive collection with his sister Maria Luisa Rossi (1919-2017) who retained her own private collection as well. Part of the collection was sold in March 1999 at Sotheby's, and again following Miss Rossi's death in 2020 at Christie's.

Although the sitter has yet to be identified, she bears similar resemblance to Shelley's portrait miniature of Lady Lucy Wilkins (née Shingler) (1758-1835), last sold at Bonhams 17 November 2004. Lady Shingler was Sir Charles Wilkins (1749-1836) second wife, an orientalist who travelled to India in 1770, becoming the first Englishman to master the Sanskrit language. He was a founder of the Asiatic Society in Calcutta in 1784, returning to England two years later.

[1] First name 'The Society of Painters in Watercolours', the society was founded on 30 November 1804. The originators were Robert Hills (1769-1844), William Henry Pyne (1769-1843), Samuel Shelley (1750-1808) and William Frederick Wells (1762-1836). The aims of the society were to enable watercolours to be better seen establishing an annual exhibition of members' work. The society was given a Royal Charter in 1881 and became the Royal Watercolour Society.