THE LIMNER COMPANY



SARAH BIFFIN (1784 - 1850)

Napoleon I on horseback at the Battle of Waterloo

Circa: 1845

1845

Watercolour on paper

Wood frame

Signed and dated 'Drawn and written by Miss Biffin/ without hands 1845'

184 mm (7 $^{1}/_{4}$ inches) high

This scene, showing the retreating back of the Emperor Napoleon, was painted by Biffin from her studio in Liverpool in 1845. She had moved to the city in 1841 in order to fulfil an ambitious plan to travel to America, following in the footsteps of other mid-Victorian celebrities who had spread their fame across the Atlantic. Instead, ill health and seemingly an increasing mental fragility confined her to working from a new studio in Bold Street.

Drawn thirty years after Napoleon did in fact retreat (in June 1815), Valeria Vallucci has been able to pinpoint exactly the position of the retreating Emperor as heading north to re-join Marshal Reille's II Corps de la Grande Armée.[1] Biffin's time in Brussels, in 1821, may have prompted an interest in this battle (although it was of course also a major event in her lifetime) and the anniversary may have felt a suitable time to produce this particular painting.

The main focus of the image is Napoleon on his horse, but Biffin does not shy away from the more gruesome nature of battle – to the side is a helmet (possibly from the British Hussars), which lies beside a severed leg on the country lane. This watercolour is a fascinating departure from Biffin's usual portrait commissions and an insight into her personal interests and values.

Biffin had been born into a farming family in Somerset in 1784, where her baptism records state that she was ‘born without arms and legs’. Teaching herself to write and draw from a young age, Biffin rose to fame as an artist and established a professional career as a portrait painter. Throughout her long and successful career, she travelled extensively, took commissions from royalty, and recorded her own likeness through exquisitely detailed self-portraits.

Around the age of twenty, Biffin left home. She contracted herself to a ‘Mr Dukes’ who toured the country with Biffin, visiting county fairs where she was described as the ‘Eighth Wonder’. Using her mouth and shoulder, Biffin would sew, write, paint watercolours and portrait miniatures in front of crowds who turned up and left with a sample of her writing included in the cost of their ticket. One such spectator was the wealthy and well-connected Earl of Morton, who supported her in her quest to finesse her artistic skills. In her mid-twenties she began formal tuition with a miniature painter, William Marshall Craig. From 1816 she set herself up as an independent artist and later took commissions from nobility and royalty.

Biffin travelled extensively, exhibiting her artwork and taking commissions all over the country and abroad. She took studios in cities including London, Brighton, Birmingham, Cheltenham and Liverpool. In each of these cities, she taught the art of miniature painting and was a champion of women students in particular.

[1] See Valeria Vallucci ‘Biffin and Waterloo’; https://philipmould.com/news/300-biffin-and-waterloo-by-valeria-vallucci/.

Exhibitions

"Without Hands"; The Art of Sarah Biffin; Philip Mould Gallery, London, 1 November -21 December 2022

Literature:

E. Rutherford and E. Smith (ed.), "Without Hands"; The Art of Sarah Biffin, London, 2022, Cat. 35.