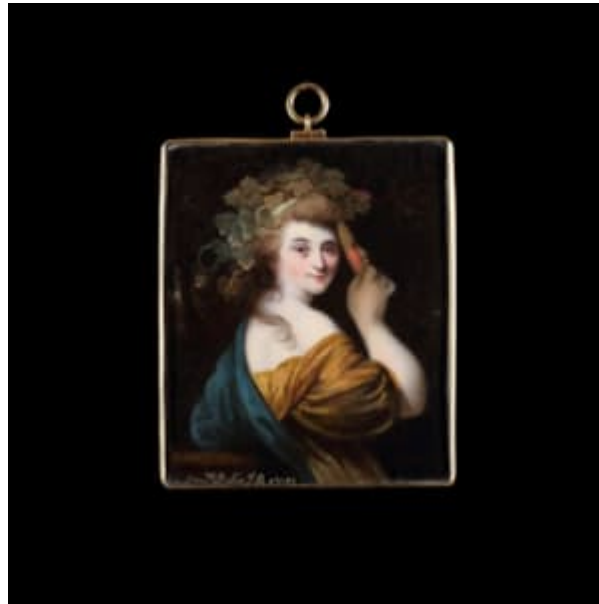


THE LIMNER COMPANY



WILLIAM RUSSELL BIRCH (1755 - 1834)

Portrait enamel of Giovanna Bacelli (full name Giovanna Francesca Antonia Giuseppa Zanerini) (1753–1801), wearing ochre dress, dark green cloak and leaves in her hair, she holds a mask in her right hand

Circa: 1783

1783

Enamel on copper

Signed on obverse with initials and inscribed 'W.B./ from Sir J.R 1783'

Gilt-metal frame

Rectangular, 75 mm (3 inches) high

This rare, early enamel by Warwick-born artist William Russell Birch was painted after the oil portrait of Giovanna Zanerini by Sir Joshua Reynolds, which was completed in 1782. In 1783, Reynolds's oil hung at the Royal Academy, as a 'portrait of a lady', but it is likely that contemporary audiences knew that this was Giovanna, the dancer and long-term mistress of the 3rd Earl of Dorset. The commission of the oil was undertaken by the Earl and it is possible that he also commissioned this enamel as a portable companion piece.

Venetian ballerina Giovanna Zanerini, was the principal ballerina at the King's Theatre, Haymarket (using the stage name Giovanna Baccelli) and the long-term mistress of John Sackville, 3rd Earl of Dorset. Aside from the Reynolds portrait, Dorset commissioned a painting of her in 1780–81 from Thomas Gainsborough[1] and a sculpture showing her nude and prone on a divan and cushions; this is still to be found at Knole. When made Ambassador to France, Zanerini accompanied Dorset to Paris, where she danced at the Opera by invitation.[2] (When he was made Knight of the Garter (KG), she wore the blue ribbon of the Garter while dancing.) Dorset and Giovanna had a son together: John Frederick Sackville (1778–1796), who was raised by his father at Paris and Knole after the couple parted in 1789.

Birch must have shown great technical aptitude at an early age - as a child he was taken in by a wealthy cousin in Birmingham, who apprenticed him to London jeweller and goldsmith, Thomas Jeffreys. Six years later he began studying enamel painting under Henry Spicer. In 1775 he was living in Covent Garden and by 1787, he had moved to Hampstead Heath. He exhibited at the Royal Academy from 1781 to 1794 – in 1783, the year this enamel was painted, he exhibited a portrait of Mrs Siddons in the character of Isabella. In addition to his skills as miniaturist and enameller, he also began working as a printmaker. In 1794, he emigrated to Philadelphia with his son, Thomas (later a marine painter). Along with his son, he engraved two series of 'Views in Philadelphia' (1800) and 'Country Seats...' (1808), as well painting enamels and miniatures of prominent Americans. He died in Philadelphia, aged 79.

A later example of a rectangular enamel by Birch in the Metropolitan Museum, New York, is similarly signed in gold-coloured paint.[3] This enamel would have been executed at the height of Zanerini's career and would have been an important commission for Birch. At this date, she also danced with great success in Venice in 1783-4, and at the Paris Opéra as late as 1788. The enamel had lost both the identity of the artist and sitter since being offered at Sotheby's in 1993.

[1] Now at Tate Britain, London, T02000.

[2] When Dorset was made Knight of the Garter (KG), she wore the blue ribbon of the Garter while dancing (as recorded by Horace Walpole).

[3] See <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/10165> - portrait of Brock Livingston Delaplaine, signed and dated 1817, Accession Number: 1985.141.12