

THE LIMNER COMPANY



RICHARD COSWAY (1742 - 1821)

A Courting Couple seated under a tree

Circa: Circa 1785

Circa 1785

Pen and brown ink on laid paper

Mount with wash and gilded wood frame (glazed)

23.3 x 18.9 cm (9 1/8 x 7 1/2 inches)

This engaging pen and ink drawing echoes an etching from 1784 of Cosway and his wife, Maria, seated with their servant Ottobah Cugoano.[1] Unlike the bucolic scene in the present work, the portrait of husband and wife was set in the formal garden of their new London home – Schomberg House in Pall Mall.

The figures in that etching show knowledge of two marital self-portraits by Peter Paul Rubens (both now in the Alte Pinakothek, Munich): the so-called 'Honeysuckle Bower', depicting Rubens and his first wife, Isabella Brant, seated beneath foliage, and the 'Walk in the Garden', in which the artist is seen strolling with his second wife, Helena Fourment, and son Nicolas in the garden of his house in Antwerp. Certainly, the seventeenth-century dress seen in both portraits pays direct homage to Rubens and also Cosway's own extensive collection of old master drawings and painting.

This pen and ink drawing however could be seen as a precursor to the marital portrait; here, the young gentleman attempts to interrupt the concentration of the woman reading, his hand gesture pointing to his heart. The seated male sitter echoes the Cosway's self-portrait, known from a stipple engraving by Marino or Mariano Bovi (Bova), after Richard Cosway, published March 1786 (a version is in the National Portrait Gallery).

Interest in drawings by Cosway has grown over recent years, with a world record price achieved in Paris in January 2020 for his portrait of the Prince of Wales, the future George IV, which phone bidders battled over until the price reached €416,000. The year before, Cosway's pencil drawing of Maria Fitzherbert, the prince's morganatic wife, made £81,250.

[1] Ottobah Cugoana (1757-1791) was an anti-slavery campaigner and one of the first formerly enslaved people to write and publish a text in the English language. He is commemorated with a blue plaque at Schomberg House on Pall Mall, where from about 1784 until 1791 he worked as a servant while writing and campaigning.

Literature:

G. Barnett, Richard and Maria Cosway, London 1995, fig. 5