

THE LIMNER COMPANY



JOHN DONALDSON (Circa 1737 - 1801)

A portrait miniature of a Gentleman, wearing brown coat, white waistcoat with embroidered edging and white frilled shirt, his hair powdered

Circa: Circa 1785

Circa 1785

Watercolour on ivory

Ivory registration number: 61DDXQHX

Set into a gold ring with seed pearl border

Navette-shaped, 30 mm (1 1/8 inches) high

Donaldson's portrait miniatures are often misattributed but in fact a cohesive group of extremely high quality works show his characteristic soft stipple coupled with a high attention to detail. One of his few signed and dated works, now in the collection of the National Galleries in Edinburgh, shows the standard by which he should be judged, alongside his contemporaries John Smart and Richard Cosway (Lady with Powdered Hair, signed and dated 1787; NG Scot.). More recent discoveries have been made in the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum, as well as the Tansey Collection in Celle, Germany.[1]

Edinburgh-born Donaldson moved to London in 1760, where he stayed for the remainder of his career. He retained connections to Scotland where David Steuart Erskine, eleventh earl of Buchan was a major supporter, buying his early works and later contributing to his memoir.[2] Like John Smart, Donaldson remained loyal to the Society of Artists - in 1764 he became a member of the organisation, exhibiting there on a frequent basis - and in 1789 a member of its council.

The small portrait here, of a gentlemen, set into a ring, appears to be the only extant jewellery work by the artist. Certainly, it is possible that Donaldson's career as a fashionable society miniaturist was

compromised by both his character and personal views, neither of which he seems to have been keen to repress for the sake of business. Born in Edinburgh to a glove-maker, his father seems to have possessed similar eccentricities to his son – being ‘of so peculiar a cast of mind that he was inclined to discuss metaphysical subjects while he cut out the gloves’.[3]

Donaldson appears to have been as much a thinker and advocate of an alternative lifestyle (as James Boswell noted, he ‘defended adultery and he opposed revealed religion’)[4] as an artist and as such his straightforwardly commissioned miniatures are far fewer in number than those of his contemporaries. He certainly seems to have had interests in many different areas – and in 1793 (perhaps in an attempt to supplement his income) he patented a system for preserving ‘animal and vegetable substances on long voyages’. Likewise, he authored two books - *Elements of Beauty: also Reflections on the Harmony of Sensibility and Reason* in 1780, with a second edition in 1786, ‘much improved, to which is annexed a short analysis of the human mind’, and *Poems* (1784; 2nd edn, 1786, with ‘the additional poem: Danae, from the Greek of Simonides’). Sadly these enterprises were not enough to prevent his death in poverty in 1801.

[1] See notes on the Tansey Collection website: <https://tansey-miniatures.com/en/collection/10678>

[2] In 1768, the Earl bought the enamel *Hero and Leander* and presented it, incorporated into a gold box, to Marischal College, Aberdeen, where it remains.

Earl of Buchan [D. S. Erskine] and others, ‘Memoir of the life of John Donaldson esq., miniature painter, portions being in his own handwriting’, U. Edin. L., MS La. IV.26

[3] *Gentleman’s Magazine*, Obituary for Donaldson, 71, 1801, 1056.

[4] Boswell's *London Journal*, 210–11, 1763.