THE LIMNER COMPANY



JOHN DOWNMAN (1749 - 1824)

Portrait miniature of a Gentleman, wearing blue coat, his hair powdered

Circa: Circa 1780

Circa 1780

Watercolour on ivory

Ivory licence number SFLQBUS6

Gold plated locket frame, the reverse glazed to reveal gold letters ‘FJC’ (?) on brown plaited hair, within engraved border

Oval, 50 mm (2 inches) high

Born in North Wales, John Downman (1750-1824) was expected to follow his father in his profession as a local attorney. However, from the age he could pick up a pencil it was clear that he was a talented artist and, in his teens, he began training in Liverpool. In 1769, he entered the newly formed Royal Academy Schools where he was taught by Benjamin West. West remained something of a hero for Downman throughout his life. West supported his former pupil’s burgeoning professional career but was also representative of an artist who seamlessly moved between grand ‘history’ painting and portraiture (which largely paid the bills). Downman described West as his ‘most beloved teacher’,[1] and in 1777 painted a portrait of him in oils on copper in which West holds the preliminary drawing for the finished oil.

Downman’s artistic training continued, as with so many artists of the eighteenth century, in Italy, where he travelled with Joseph Wright of Derby. On his return to England he established himself as a portrait painter in Cambridge in 1776 and by 1778 he was working in London and the West Country, which he visited frequently over the following thirty years.

As an artist, Downman was most successful when he limited himself to portraiture. The aristocratic and

fashionable flocked to his studio almost as soon as he began his independent career. This is supported by drawings of the Waldegrave sisters, Charlotte Maria and Anna Horatia, both portraits dated 1780. Although the girls were intimately connected to the Royal family, they were not received at court due to the enduring anger of the king, who had not approved their parent'smatch. A commission from such prominent (and slightly scandalous) members of the aristocracy so early in his career drove others swiftly to Downman's studio door.

Downman's ability to capture a likeness using his unique blend of black chalk and stump over graphite, with highlights of watercolour on both sides of his favoured wove paper allowed for a swift sitting. Many of these drawings were accompanied by portrait miniatures, although these are far fewer in number. While oil portraits could take days, even weeks, to complete, Downman's portraits required the sitter's prescence for just a few hours.

To his enduring disappointment, Downman never followed West in becoming a member of the Royal Academy, only achieving 'associate' status. Through his portraits, however, Downman captured a moment in time which managed to be transient and permanent in equal measure.

The present work is a previously unknown work by Downman, painted circa 1780.

[1] Dr Williamson, John Downman, A.R.A. His Life and Works, (London, 1907), p. xii; D. Foskett, Miniatures Dictionary and Guide, (Woodbridge, 1987), p.530.