THE LIMNER COMPANY



JOSEPH PARENT

Portrait miniature of the Emperor Napoleon (1769-1821), wearing the dark green uniform with red piping of chasseur-a-cheval de la Garde Imperial, the red sash, badge and star of the Légion d'honneur, and badge of the Iron Crown of Lombardy

Circa: Dated 1815

Dated 1815

Signed and dated, JP 1815

Ivory registration number: LT3G55EY

Set into a rectangular ormolu frame, with spandrel decoration and surmounted by an Imperial Crown with laurel leaves

50 mm (2 inches) high

The present portrait is by Joseph Parent, an artist working in the style of Jean-Baptiste Isabey[1] (1767-1855), who, like Isabey, worked to meet the great demand for portraits of Napoleon. Parent painted numerous miniatures of Napolean and his generals, and may have held an official appointment under the Empire.[2] It is therefore likely that he would have painted the Emperor at least once from life.

This miniature is among Parent's earliest portraits of Napoleon. He is depicted wearing the decorations of the order he established, Ordre national de la Légion d'honneur, which remains the highest French order of merit. Napoleon also wears the uniform of the regiment that often served as his personal escort. Other examples by Parent include one at the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin [M.328], one offered at Bonhams in 2005, and one sold at Christie's in 1974.[3] Some works have appeared at auction with the artist's name conflated with that of Aubert-Henri-Joseph Parent (1753-1855), a sculptor, designer and architect who enjoyed the patronage of Louis XVI, fled France during the Revolution and returned in 1813 to teach architecture. This is perhaps reflective of the little that is known of Parent, save that he worked in Paris, living at 3, rue de l'Echelle, and exhibited at the Salon from 1822-1833.[4]

Portraiture was employed to great effect by Napoleon Bonaparte, with miniatures playing as important a role as large oil paintings. Indeed, a royal institution for the administration of gifts (Service des presents du Roi), which had been responsible for distributing miniatures of the monarch under the Ancien Régime, was revived under the Empire.[5]

Napoleon understood the particular effect of possessing portrait miniatures - attested by the story of him stealing four gold boxes with portrait miniatures of Louis XVIII's close family from the king's study in the Tuileries Palace.[6] Napoleon kept hold of the miniatures, even taking them with him on his banishment to St Helena.

The year the present miniature was painted saw Napoleon's ultimate downfall. Having escaped imprisonment on the island of Elba in February 1815, he hoped to capitalise on the growing unpopularity of Louis XVIII. As he gathered supporters - including French soldiers that had been sent to capture him - the king fled the country. Napoleon marched on Paris and installed a government, but his priority was to defeat the coalition against him. He led his troops to Belgium (at the time, the United Kingdom of the Netherlands) where they would meet the combined forces of Britain and Prussia at the Battle of Waterloo on 18th June. It was Napoleon's most crushing defeat, bringing an end to the Napoleonic Wars, and although he was able to retreat and return to Paris, he abdicated in favour of his son, Napoléon François Joseph Charles Bonaparte, Napoleon II (1811–1832), on 22nd June. He surrendered to the British on 15th July and would be held in captivity for the rest of his life, being shipped to the remote island of St Helena in the autumn of 1815.

[1] Parent followed Isabey in adopting the sky background used by English miniaturists – see Olausson, Magnus, Miniature Painting in the Nationalmuseum (Nationalmuseum, Stockholm), 2021, p.150

[2] Schidloff, Leo R., The Miniature in Europe in the 16th, 17th, 18th and 19th centuries, vol.ii (Druck: Akademische Druck -u. Verlagsanstalt), 1964, p.610

[3] Another was recorded in the collection of Bernard Franck, Paris – see catalogue note for Bonhams, Fine Portrait Miniatures, 28 April 2005, lot 285

[4] Shidloff, p.610

[5] Olausson, pp.57-58

[6] Olausson, p.62