THE LIMNER COMPANY



SAMUEL SHELLEY (1750/56 - 1808)

Portrait miniature of a Lady Sleeping

Circa: Circa 1785

Circa 1785

7.4 x 0 cm (2 $^{7}/_{8}$ x 0 inches)

Watercolour on ivory

Ivory registration number: KWKMR3K8

Later gold frame

Oval, 74 mm (2 $^{7}/_{8}$ inches) high

Samuel Shelley was one of the most ambitious and versatile portrait miniaturists. The quality of the painting in watercolour of this sensitive portrait of a woman sleeping would, in large format, have rivalled the most vaunted artists of the day, including Shelley's hero Sir Joshua Reynolds. At his best, as seen here, Shelley was capable of producing a high level of romanticism in his portraits, bestowing a distinct level of engagement on his subjects. His understanding of anatomy is clear in this work in the beautifully observed hand.

Shelley was also an experimental artist – working in a number of different mediums and using a larger size of ivory – often used in an unconventional way, such as the present work where the oval is presented horizontally.

Shelley was a native of London and followed a relatively orthodox route into his chosen career, and after winning the much-coveted premium prize awarded annually by the Society of Arts at the age of fourteen, entered the Royal Academy Schools on 21st March 1774. After studying at the R.A. schools (and

exhibiting there from 1774-1804), he became an important voice in the history of watercolour painting in the eighteenth century. A founder member of the first watercolour society in 1805, he believed that watercolours should be given their own forum and exhibition space in order to be properly appreciated. Before the formation of such a society, watercolours could only be shown next to oils at the conventional exhibition spaces of the Society of Artists or Royal Academy. This new separation from brightly coloured, large oil paintings allowed watercolours to be viewed among paintings in the same media and heralded a new admiration of such work. This did not mean that he was unaware of developments in oil paintings, with Sir Joshua Reynolds remaining a constant inspiration. Shelley's desire to compete with oil paintings also led him to produce small watercolour subject pictures to exhibit alongside the portrait miniatures he painted all his life, such as the present example. This type of work broke Shelley free from traditional portrait miniature painting and he demonstrated his originality through painting subject pictures.

Shelley's output was often at odds with the demands of his patrons and he failed to find a steady market for his subject miniatures. With an image such as the present work, however, he was able to successfully combine a portrait with an ambitious composition, which played to his strengths as an artist. This work is contemporary in its setting and may be a portrait of a known sitter, as opposed to hiding female nudity behind a mythological or Shakespearean guise. The sitter bears some resemblance to Mrs Mary Robinson (1758-1800), the celebrated actress, who had a brief but notorious affair with the Prince of Wales.