

# THE LIMNER COMPANY



**PETER OLIVER (Circa 1594 - 1647)**

**Venetia, Lady Digby (née Stanley) (1600-33), wearing an embroidered orange and gold dress, with 'saffron' lace ruff and earrings, her long wavy hair falling to her shoulders**

Circa: Circa 1615-1620

Circa 1615-1620

Watercolour on parchment

Signed with initials *PO*

55 mm (2 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub> inches) high

This portrait of Jacobean beauty Venetia, Lady Digby, dates from the time at which she was first introduced to the Stuart Court. Her identity can be confirmed given the similarity between this portrait and another by Peter Oliver that can be found in the Burghley House collection [1]. At this point, she was still Venetia Stanley, and had been brought up as a Roman Catholic. In her youth she had been introduced to Sir Kenelm Digby, who became her childhood sweetheart. Though the two were infatuated, their romance was not looked upon highly by either of their parents. In fact, Digby's mother is known to have intercepted his letters to Venetia while he was away in Europe, to convince her that he had died.

Before she would see Digby again, Venetia had become wrapped up in salacious rumours relating to her and other members of the Stuart court. It seems that her beauty had led people to believe that she had multiple lovers, including Sir Edmund Wyld and the Brothers Richard and Edmund Sackville (who would later become the 3rd and 4th Earls of Dorset respectively). These rumours went so far that a later commentator, John Aubrey (1626-97) reported that a sign reading 'PRAY COME NOT NEER,/ FOR DAME VENETIA STANLEY LODGETH HERE' [2] was placed above her bedroom door.

In 1624, Digby returned from Europe, and he and Venetia married in secret, so as to avoid the

disapproval of their parents. It is thought that their marriage was devoted, though Venetia had struggled throughout six childbirths, which Digby himself had described as being 'exceeding painful and dangerous' [3]. This devotion was marked following Venetia's sudden death at the age of 33, the day of which Digby commissioned Van Dyck to paint a portrait of his wife on her deathbed, which can now be found in the Dulwich Picture Gallery [4].

As the son of Isaac Oliver, Peter Oliver had been taught how to limne by a great master of the art, and this is certainly clear in the present example. His style was extremely close to that of his father's and often the differences between the works of the two are difficult to decipher. Aside from his connections to his father, he enjoyed a successful career under the patronage of Charles I, Prince of Wales. It was under Charles that he had gained the responsibility for painting copies of Italian Paintings entering the Royal Collection which were highly valued. [5] Peter inherited his father's drawings, miniatures and materials, as well as his position at court serving Charles as both Prince of Wales and eventually, King of England.

[1] Burghley House Collections, MIN0019.

[2] A.Clark (ed.), 'Brief Lives', Chiefly of Contemporaries, set down by John Aubrey, between the years 1669 & 1696 (2 Vols., Oxford, 1898), pp. 229-30.

[3] A.Clark (ed.), 'Brief Lives', Chiefly of Contemporaries, set down by John Aubrey, between the years 1669 & 1696 (2 Vols., Oxford, 1898), pp. 229-30.

[4] Dulwich Picture Gallery, DPG194.

[5] Peter completed his father Isaac's great unfinished work of The Entombment for Charles.

### **Exhibitions**

London, Philip Mould & Company, Jewel in the Hand: Early Portrait Miniatures from Noble & Private Collections, 12 March - 18 April 2019, no. 16.

### **Literature:**

E. Rutherford et. al., Jewel in the Hand: Early Portrait Miniatures from Noble & Private Collections, Philip Mould & Company, London, 2019, pp.72-73, illustrated pp.70-71.