

THE LIMNER COMPANY



SAMUEL SHELLEY (1750/56 - 1808)

Portrait miniature of a Lady, standing by columns with red drapery, wearing a white dress with gold shawl draped over her arms

Circa: Circa 1783

Circa 1783

Watercolour on ivory

Ivory registration no. 6W3Q13RB

Samuel Shelley's portraits of women and children, especially those on a larger scale, are considered his best works. He often worked on larger ivories than his contemporaries – many over 9 cm high – which have the appearance of larger oil paintings. With the increased surface area he could employ three-quarter-length compositions in the style of Reynolds and other grandiose portrait painters; he also sometimes copied works by Reynolds. Shelley used large quantities of gum (to mix his pigments), which, together with the way he applied the paint, lends to the effect of an oil painting. Being able to achieve this on such a small scale only proves the talent that Shelley had in this form.

Samuel Shelley was born in Whitechapel and remained a Londoner for the rest of his life, listing various London addresses when exhibiting and as inscriptions on his work – the present miniature, for example, is inscribed on the reverse with his address at 29 Henrietta Street, Covent Garden, London. He is said to have been largely self-taught before entering the Royal Academy Schools in 1774. Shelley exhibited at the Royal Academy between 1774 and 1804, including the present work which was included in the 1783 exhibition – as no. 341, 'Portrait of a Lady'.

Shelley was a prolific and versatile artist, also producing watercolours and oil paintings, drawing book illustrations and engraving some of his own works. Scholar Basil Long describes him as 'an amiable character who helped other artists', and it is certainly the case that he taught miniaturists of the younger generation including Alexander Robertson (1772-1841) and Edward Nash (1778-1821).² He also exhibited at the British Institution and Old Water Colour Society, of which he was a founder member.

In 1968, The Connoisseur published an image of this work as part of a piece on a singular private collection of portrait miniatures, where it sat beside another portrait of a lady by Shelley, and other miniatures, largely from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

As in the present example, many of Shelley's female portraits show the sitter wearing a rope of pearls. In fact, the miniature that this sat alongside in The Connoisseur private collection also depicted a woman with pearls in her hair. It may be that this was a studio prop or an item of jewellery which belonged to the artist as such a large number of female sitters are depicted with a long string of pearls looped through their hair, draped about their décolletage, or held in their hands.

Exhibitions

London, Royal Academy of Arts, 1783, no.341, as 'Portrait of a Lady'.

Literature:

The Connoisseur Magazine for Collectors, Portrait Miniatures in a Private Collection: 2, Vol 168, August 1968, pp.226-227, illustrated no.7.