

# THE LIMNER COMPANY



**THOMAS FORSTER**

**Plumbago portrait of a young Girl, likely Elizabeth or Mary St Lo**

Circa: 1705

1705

10.5 x 8.2 cm (4 1/8 x 3 1/4 inches)

Plumbago on vellum

Signed and dated lower right: 'T Forster / Delin / 1705'

Backing paper to the frame inscribed in ink '(4) / one of five', and in pencil 'drawings / by T. Forster 1705', and further below in ink 'H.T. 1891'.

Gold and black verre eglomisé mount, stained fruit-wood frame.

This portrait belongs to a family group dating between 1704-1705 said to depict George St Lo (1658–1718), his wife, Elizabeth Chiffinch (b.1669), and their three children, John, Elizabeth and Mary. This portrait depicts the younger of the two daughters. The sitters were unidentified however when the group came to auction in 1983, and the portraits were dispersed. The portrait of the sitter's brother was identified as John St Lo when offered for sale at Sotheby's in 1991, and again at Lowell Libson & Jonny Yarker Ltd in 2018. [1] The father's, wife's and elder daughter's portraits from the group were more recently offered for sale at Sotheby's in 2019, but remained unidentified. [2] A portrait of George St Lo by Forster, not of the aforementioned group, resides at the British Museum [no. 1890,0512.81].

George St Lo was a captain in the Royal Navy and naval administrator. In 1689, he was taken prisoner by the French following a 7-hour engagement with a ship superior to his own. Upon his release, St Lo published an account of his imprisonment and his observations of the French navy. The battle had left St Lo with severe injuries that prevented him from seafaring again, and, after declining an offer to become governor of New York, he accepted a commissionership. Negligence in this role however, led to construction workers for the first Eddystone Lighthouse being captured by a French privateer. His next appointment was as Commander-in-Chief of ships in the Medway and at the Nore until the accession of

George I. At around the same time he began to pursue a career in politics and was successfully elected in 1701 as the Member of Parliament for Weymouth and Melcombe Regis. He also served as equerry to Prince George of Denmark c.1700-04.

The sitter's mother, Elizabeth Chiffinch, was granddaughter of notable courtier Thomas Chiffinch (Cheffin) (1600-1666). Thomas and his brother William, had been companions in exile of Charles II and his brother James, late James VII & II.

Plumbago miniatures became popular in England for a short time circa 1660, the fashion for plumbagos having developed alongside the Netherlandish print trade since the early 17th century. They were often used as the basis for engravings and later sought to imitate the appearance of mezzotint engravings, associated with the Old Masters.

The term plumbago derives from the Latin word for lead, plumbum, although they were more commonly drawn in graphite. The pure graphite would be sharpened to a point and used like a modern-day pencil on a vellum or (later) paper support. As drawings, they were a cheaper alternative for patrons compared to traditional miniatures. Their popularity was short-lived however and they were not much produced after 1720.

Thomas Forster was a leading plumbago artist, his highly finished works considered by many to be the finest of the artform. Forster's sitters are usually depicted luxuriating in dynamic swathes of drapery. Forster was particularly adept at capturing the shimmer of light across fabric, to which the monochromatic medium lent itself. His works are held in many major collections including the Victoria and Albert Museum, Huntington Library (California), the British Museum and the Royal Collection.

[1] Sotheby's, London, 'Early English Drawings and Watercolours from the Collection of Colin Hunter', 11 July 1991, lot 31; Lowell Libson & Jonny Yarker Ltd, 'The Spirit & Force of Art: Drawing in Britain 1600-1750', catalogue 2018, cat. no.64, p.166 – view online [here](#).

[2] Sotheby's, London, 'The Pohl-Ströher Collection of Portrait Miniatures, Part III', 5 December 2019, lots 241-243