THE LIMNER COMPANY



ROSALBA CARRIERA (1673 - 1757)

Portrait miniature of a Lady in Venetian dress

Circa: Circa 1710-20

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Watercolour on ivory

This portrait miniature is a refined and complex addition to the oeuvre of the innovative artist, Rosalba Carriera, which includes her delicate pointillist technique of the skin and impasto application of paint to describe parts of the sitter's costume. The light fading of the flesh tones is also typical, as is the way other passages remain startlingly fresh, i.e. the red ribbon tied to her fan and in her hair. A comparable example in terms of date and composition can be found in the Wallace Collection [Inv. M310]. [1]

The thick gouache used to paint the ornate lace cuffs of the sitter's chemise and frothy lace stomacher are typical of Carriera. Venetian lace was a luxury sought the world over at this date and Pierre-Jean Mariette (1694-1774), one of the foremost collectors of drawings during the 18th century, claimed that Carriera began as a designer of lace before becoming a painter. [2] Her mother was a lace maker and it's not unlikely that she began work in the industry, although accounts of her career beginnings differ.

It has been suggested that Carriera began her artistic career painting ivory boxes (popular as snuff boxes and more lucrative than lace), thence becoming a miniature painter. However, an anonymous biography written 2 years before her death in 1755, states that Carriera began as an oil painter before working in miniature, and only then painting ivory boxes. Evidently skilled across a number of media, Carriera later became a celebrated pastelist and is credited with advancing that medium, paving the way for likes of Jean-Étienne Liotard (1702-1789). Whatever the progression of her chosen discipline, Carriera's miniatures predominantly date to first half of her career, and her familiarity with ivory through decorating snuff boxes likely lead to her experimentation with the material as a miniature support. She was the first miniaturist to use ivory, possibly as early as 1696 [3], and following her innovation, it was to become the favoured material for portrait miniatures until miniatures themselves were eclipsed by photography in the mid-19th century.

Although an unlikely paint support – naturally slightly greasy, making paint unlikely to adhere without a great deal of preparation – ivory had qualities which appealed to artists and sitters. Translucent washes of watercolour, allowing the white surface of the ivory to be left partially visible, gave skin a luminescent appearance and subtle highlights to hair and fabrics. It was not until later in the 18th century that artists would fully exploit ivory in this way, yet we see here Carriera's deft use of the support's natural luminosity with her barely-there washes rendering the present sitter's skin.

Carriera was born in Venice, where she spent most of her working life, although she also worked in Rome, where she was admitted as a pittrice e miniatrice veneziana (Venetian miniature painter) into the Accademia di San Luca in Rome in 1705, exhibiting a miniature of 'A Girl with a Dove' as her reception piece; and Paris in 1720-1, where she became a member of the French Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture. Carriera was very successful in her own lifetime, well known across Europe chiefly for her work in pastel. Her patrons included Friedrich-Augustus II, Elector of Saxony, prominent members of the French court and Consul Joseph Smith, many of whose purchases were later acquired for the Royal Collection by King George III.

The present sitter wears traditional Venetian dress, including the zendale - a long black hood made of silk draped over an iron wire, which stood proud of the wearer's head so as not to disturb her hair, and hung down to the waist where it was fastened. [4] [5] It was not unusual however, for tourists to sit for portraits in local clothing and the path to Carriera's Venice studio was well trodden by visitors from all over Europe.

Hand-held fans too were popular tourist souvenirs. [6] They had already gained notoriety as an instrument of coquetry, but were also useful of course for dealing with heat. The sitter may be holding a pair of gloves in her left hand, another popular accessory of the rococo period.

[1] The condition of the portrait in the Wallace Collection shows some overpainting of the face, which has raised questions in the past on the authenticity of the work as by Carriera.

[2] Duffy, S., Vogtherr, C. M., Miniatures in The Wallace Collection (Paul Holberton), 2010, p.35.

[3] Foskett, D., Collecting Miniatures (The Antique Collectors' Club), 1979, p.162.

[4] Ribeiro, A., Dress in Eighteenth-Century Europe, 1715-1789 (Yale University Press), 2nd ed., 2002, p.110.

[5] Often depicted as part of carnival dress in combination with the tabarro (black cloak) and underneath the tricorno (tricorn hat), with a white mask.

[6] Ribeiro, p.159