THE LIMNER COMPANY



JOHN SMART (1742 - 1811)

Portrait miniature of a Young Man, probably Alexander Johnston (1775-1849), aged 15, wearing a black jacket and white stock

Circa: 1790

1790

Watercolour on ivory (licence CREPMJLJ)

Oval, 7.6 cm (3 inches) high

Signed and dated 1790 with an 'I' for India

Alexander Johnston (1775-1849), the British statesman and advocate-general of Ceylon is shown here portrayed by Smart at around fifteen years of age. Descended through the family, this is the first time the portrait of this philanthropic pioneer of indigenous rights has been seen in public.

In 1781, the Johnston family boarded an East Indiaman destined for Madras. Alexander's father Samuel likely had an appointment in the service of the East India Company. Four years later, John Smart the artist would also travel to Madras, looking to make his fortune, as had Alexander's father Samuel, from the growing opportunities in India for the British.

Alexander lived in India from the age of six until the age of sixteen, when he and his family returned to England. While in India, he was taught the missionary Christian Friedrich Swartz and Sir Thomas Munro and through them Alexander soon learnt to speak Tamil, Telugu and Hindustani fluently – a fact which would prove essential to his future. At the age of 11 he was offered a commission in the Dragoons which he, or the family, declined.

With England as his new base from 1792, he travelled through Europe while studying law, including

Gottingen and Hanover. Far from being willing to settle down in London, he travelled to Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) to become the Advocate General of Ceylon in 1799. In this same year he married Louisa Campbell, who was aged only 17. [1]

The work that Johnston did in Ceylon was highly praised, and so was his character. In the Geentleman's Magazine, he was said to be 'ever conspicuous for his munificent acts, his kindness to the poor, and his endeavours to promote the rising talents of his countrymen'. Having been taught native languages at a young age, he was able to act as an interpreter, and was a strong supporter of native rights. These included a system of universal popular education, religious liberty, and emancipation of slaves. Public employment was then largely opened to the indigenous population, while Europeans were still permitted to invest in land. Trial by jury was established, and a considerable advance was made in the preparation of a code of law, in which provision was made for the due preservation of the views and usages of Hindus, Muhamadans, and Buddhists. [2] When Johnston returned to England in 1819, Lord Grey declared in the House of Lords that his 'conduct in the island of Ceylon alone had immortalised his name.' He was also the founder of the Royal Asiatic Society (1823). He died in London on 6 March 1849, and was buried at Carnsalloch, Dumfriesshire, the place where he had been born.

Johnston was a typical sitter for Smart in this period, and the portrait in turn is archetypal of Smart's work during the second half of his sojourn in India. John Smart had trained as an artist in London, where he created and maintained connections with his sitters, largely of the wealthy middle class. This proved most advantageous for the artist when he made the decision to move to Madras in 1785, where employees of the East India Company, whom he had met in England, also lived. Alexander is shown here slightly flushed, which may have been a consequence of wearing too warm clothing that was intended for the English, not Indian, climate.

At fifteen years of age, Alexander Johnston was already a conspicuously gifted young man. That he went on to live a life far beyond the horizons of most Georgian gentlemen, using his intelligence for altruistic means at a time when many were becoming rich on the spoils of Empire-building, makes for an extraordinary narrative. Johnston was portrayed in later life in popular prints but this portrait of the future advocate for human rights is a fascinating image of him on the brink of manhood, his ideas likely shaped by what he had witnessed as a child in India.

[1] Louisa was the only daughter of Captain Lord William Campbell, R.N.

[2] For a letter upon the jury system in Ceylon see Bentham's Works, ii. 182–8.