THE LIMNER COMPANY



RICHARD COSWAY (1742 - 1821)

Portrait miniature of an Officer, possibly The Hon Col. Cosmo Gordon (c.1737- after 1783), wearing the uniform of the Grenadier Company of the 3rd Foot Guards

Circa: circa 1775

circa 1775

Watercolour on ivory (licence GCUV3J1A)

Oval, 3.1 cm (1 $^{1}/_{4}$ inches) high

Associated gilded-metal frame

Born in 1737, Cosmo Gordon was a son of William Gordon, 2nd Earl of Aberdeen, and his Wife, Lady Anne Gordon. He was not the first son of the Earl, and was therefore unlikely to inherit his title, so instead took on the title ‘Honourable’. Later, following a tumultuous military career, he would also gain the rank of Colonel.

The present portrait bears a great resemblance to a portrait of Cosmo Gordon in the Goodwood collection, by an artist of the English School in the 18th century. More specifically, the sitters wear the same uniform, which is of the Grenadier Company of the 3rd Foot Guards, later the Scots Guards. In fact, the full-scale portriat in the Goodwood collection is used by Cecil C.P Lawson in his *History of the Uniforms of the British Army* (vol. III, 1962) as a visual example of the uniform of this regiment. Practically all of the elements of their costume are the same, down to the hairstyle and Gorget that he wears in both portraits; only the bearskin cap is missing in Cosway’s depiction, likely because this would have not fit in to the small scale of a miniature. A Gorget, believed to have belonged to Cosmo, can be found today in the Goodwood collection.[1]

In 1776, Cosmo had arrived in America to support the British Army in American Revolutionary War. After some time, it became clear that our sitter was not particularly popular among troops, despite

having become the commander of the First Batallion in 1780. Relations with Lt. Col. Frederick Thomas, who held a commanding position below him, became especially difficult. A disagreement between the two eventually led to the court martialling of Thomas, the charge: 'secretly and scandalously aspersing Gordon's character, in a manner unlike an Officer and a Gentleman, during his absence from his command.'[2], and Cosmo insisted on his own court martial being arranged in order for him to defend his honour after Thomas was not charged. This was not a good decision for him, and a record of his trial from 1780[3] contains numerous testimonies against him.

Throuhout this process, Cosmo had repeatedly attempted to get Thomas to enter in a duel with him, which he had repeatedly declined. In June 1783, Cosmo sent Thomas a letter:

'Having had a full and honourable acquittal of the charge you brought against me, I desire you will give me personal satisfaction, and meet me with a friend and two brace of pistols and a sword, at the Ring, in Hyde Park.

Your injured obedient servant,

Cosmo Gordon[4]

On this occasion Thomas finally accepted, and the duel was organised for the 4th September 1783, to take place in Hyde Park. After a false shot from Thomas, the two went again, leaving Cosmo uninjured and Thomas with a shot in his bowel. Two days later, he died. Cosmo was charged for murder, but found not guilty.

The present miniature would have been painted before these events, though they provide an interesting insight in to the life that the sitter would go on to lead. When Cosway took a likeness of him, it is possible that the intention was to retain a smaller scale record of Cosmo before he left for America. This is not unusal for Cosway, who is known to have painted many officers, as well as regular citizens. Before the age of twelve, the artist had been sent to train at Shipley's drawing school, under Thomas Hudson. He exhibited at the Royal Academy between 1770 and 1806, and in 1786 had become the miniature painter to the Prince of Wales.

[1] 'A Fatal Dispute Among the Guards', All Things Liberty, online at https://allthingsliberty.com/2021/05/a-fatal-dispute-among-the-guards/ , accessed 20/11/2024.

[2] 'A Fatal Dispute Among the Guards', All Things Liberty, online at https://allthingsliberty.com/2021/05/a-fatal-dispute-among-the-guards/ , accessed 20/11/2024.

[3] Available to read online at Archive.org, https://archive.org/details/bim_eighteenth-century_the-trial-of-the-hon-co_gordon-cosmo_1783/mode/2up.

[4] Quoted by S. Murden, 'A Duel in Hyde Park 1783', on All Things Georgian, https://georgianera.wordpress.com/tag/colonel-cosmo-gordon/, accessed 20/11/2024.