

THE LIMNER COMPANY



GEORGE ENGLEHEART (1750 - 1829)

Portrait miniature of a Lady, traditionally identified as Miss Emma Chalmers, wearing a dress decorated with stringed pearls, holding a mask

Oval, 5.1 cm (2 inches) high

Watercolour on ivory

Ivory registration number: M3NUSVJC

Circa 1775

This newly re-identified portrait is an intriguing and unique addition to the oeuvre of George Engleheart, who did not often depict sitters in costume, or with props. The sitter, believed to be Emma Chalmers, faces to her right, and holds a dark mask, as if she is just about to put this on, or has just taken it off. Wearing a somewhat-highly decorated dress, she is ready to attend a masquerade ball, which since being an essential part of life at court in previous centuries had become an important social event in the eighteenth century. At an event such as this, the mask could be worn to conceal identity and were frequently associated with a sexual frisson in deceiving men. A woman portrayed with a mask might also have been an actress, although so far no record of an 'Emma Chalmers' has been found with this profession.

In contrast to the beginning of the eighteenth century, when Masquerades had been seen as frivolous revelries, but were still extremely popular, Terry Castle has remarked that, by the end of the century, they were 'relegated to the periphery of English cultural life.[1]'. Therefore, it can be assumed that this depiction of Miss Chalmers is not meant to be suggestive of scandal, but instead is meant to represent her dressed up for an event or ball that required suitable fancy dress. Perhaps she was a frequenter of these events, or was simply an extravagant woman who liked to dress up when she could, making this significant enough a part of her personality to be part of a record of her appearance. Appropriately, the mask in the portrait still provides a sense of mystery to the viewer almost 250 years after the portrait was painted.

Miss Chalmer's identity was retrieved from a record of a previous sale, in 1991. Here, the miniature was set into the lid of a tortoiseshell box, which must have been removed by the new owner, as in 1993 the miniature appeared in its current form in a sale at Bonhams. It also must have been in this original setting that the identity of the sitter was recorded, as this no longer remains connected to the miniature physically. Aside from this miniature, little is known or recorded about the life of Emma Chalmers.

Before he launched his own career as a successful miniaturist, George Engleheart had trained under George Barrett, R.A, and Sir Joshua Reynolds. This work is characteristic of that completed in the earlier part of his career, where he recorded minute details of dress that would become more generic as his career wore on and his patrons more demanding on his time[2].

[1] T. Castle, 'Eros and Liberty at the English Masquerage, 1710-1790', in *Fashion: Critical and Primary Sources, Volume 2: The Eighteenth Century*, ed. Peter McNeil, Berg, 2009, p.29.

[2] D. Foskett, *Miniatures: Dictionary and Guide*, Antique Collectors' Club, 1987, p.538, describes Engleheart's work of the later 18th century as defined by 'large deep-set eyes, set under rather heavy eyebrows, the hair drawn in lines rather than in masses....'.

Literature:

A Miss Chalmers is recorded in Engleheart's fee book in 1795, although this record would postdate the current portrait the sitters may have been related.