THE LIMNER COMPANY



THOMAS HARPER (fl.1817 - 1843)

Portrait miniature of a Lady in a pale pink rose, with other flowers surrounding her

Circa: Circa 1825

Circa 1825

Circular, 6 cm (2 $^{3}/_{8}$ inches) high

Watercolour on ivory

Later gilded fausse-montre frame

This highly unusual miniature shows a lady encased within a rose, as though she were emerging from within the flower. Although roses as an accessory within female portraiture are common, this image suggests instead that the sitter is part of the rose – likely alluding to her delicacy and perfection. The romantic intention behind this portrait also likely relates to the popularity of 'Le Langage des Fleurs', the first dictionary to explain the meanings behind various flowers, which was published in 1819 in Paris. The coded language which could be expressed through flowers allowed the rules of strict etiquette to be loosened a little – and of course, as understood today, the rose represented love.

It is now not possible to comprehend the circumstances behind this rare composition, but one explanation may be that it was inspired by John Keat's poem 'Isabella' or 'The Pot of Basil' (A Story from Boccaccio), published in 1818. This story of love and romance included many references to flowers and in particular, the rose. It was popular with pre-Raphaelite painters who painted the heroine Isabella.

Parting they seem'd to tread upon the air,

Twin roses by the zephyr blown apart

Only to meet again more close, and share

The inward fragrance of each other's heart.

Although this portrait predates the *Flower Fairies* drawn and published by Cicely Mary Barker (1895-1973), it does align with the earlier interest in fairies and miniaturisation. Fairies became a fashionable subject for Victorian artists, often taking inspiration from Shakespeare's A *Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Tempest*. John Anster Fitzgerald, Edwin Landseer, John Everett Millais, Joseph Noel Paton, Arthur Rackham and even JMW Turner – among many others – painted supernatural sprites from the 1840s onwards. The artist Richard Dadd (1817-1886), with his strange and hyper-intricate fairy paintings is an obvious point of comparison here, his dates and work near-contemporary with Harper's.

Interestingly, in his book Victorian Fairy Painting, Jeremy Maas looks at this form of artistic expression as part of the dichotomy of Victorian life. He states that; 'No other type of painting concentrates so many of the opposing elements of the Victorian psyche: the desire to escape the drear hardships of daily existence; the stirrings of new attitudes toward sex, stifled by religious dogma; a passion for the unseen; the birth of psychoanalysis; the latent revulsion against the exactitude of the new invention of photography'. Certainly, the present work goes against the conventions of traditional portrait miniatures by presenting a fantasy, rather than the ad vivum likeness that was at the heart of the portrait miniature.

Little is known about Thomas Harper but he is known to have lived in London and Brighton, exhibiting at the Royal Academy from 1817-43. An example of his work is in the Victoria and Albert Museum.