THE LIMNER COMPANY



JOHN SMART (1742 - 1811)

Portrait miniature of a Gentleman, believed to be Chevalier de Luetch, wearing a blue coat, a richly decorated ochre waistcoat with scarlet lining and edging, white stock and frilled lace cravat

Circa: 1764

1764

3.3 cm (1 $^{1}/_{4}$ inches)

Watercolour on ivory

Ivory registration number: ZUXMRQ16

Signed and dated, ‘J.S. / 1764’

John Smart has been described as ‘the finest miniaturist in eighteenth-century Britain’ and no major collection of miniatures can be considered complete if this artist is not represented. [1] He was a supremely skilled draftsman, and in his prime, Smart’s miniatures are unparalleled in their forensic detail. While Richard Cosway (1741-1821) was the premier society miniaturist of the age, Smart’s prolific oeuvre provides a fascinating and exquisitely observed insight into the wealthy middle classes.

Smart was a precocious talent. As a boy he competed with Cosway in drawing competitions and some of the surviving entries showing promise that belied his youth. He was apprenticed to William Shipley (bap.1715-1803), drawing master and social reformer in 1755. Smart exhibited at the Society of Artists 1762-83, and was made Director in 1771, before Vice President in 1777 and President in 1778. In 1784 he travelled to India, one of many British portraitists who journeyed there in search of the lucrative patronage of the ‘wealthy English residents and native princes’. [2] Indeed he was appointed miniature painter to the family of the Nawab of Arcot and was in great demand. [3] Smart returned home in 1795 and exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1797 until his death in 1811.

Smart (helpfully) seems to have adopted the habit of signing his finished miniatures since what must have been the start of this professional career, his earliest known portraits being dated 1760. The present work therefore dates to early in his career and shows Smart on the cusp of realising his full ability. His description of the sitter's lace cravat and rich waistcoat are particularly fine. His rendering of the gentleman's face, although not yet as sophisticated (and also a little faded here), shows promise, especially in the subtle observation of a '5 o'clock shadow' - particularly visible on the sitter's top lip. A comparable portrait of Sir Rowland Winn, 5th Bt (1739-1785), Bt., painted by Smart just a few years later in 1767, was recently sold by The Limner Company to the National Trust.

When sold at Bonhams in 1995, the sitter was 'believed to be Chevalier de Luetch', but we have been unable to trace a sitter by this name.

[1] Rutherford, E., & Hendra, L., John Smart: A Genius Magnified (Philip Mould & Company), a catalogue for the exhibition held at Philip Mould & Co. 25 November – 9 December 2014, p.8

[2] Foskett, D., British Portrait Miniatures (The Hamlyn Publishing Group), 1968 edition, p.112

[3] Ibid.