

THE LIMNER COMPANY



Attributed to JEAN_ANTOINE LAURENT (1763 - 1832)

Portrait miniature of a young Girl, wearing white dress with blue sash and matching bonnet, gold necklace and holding a basket of flowers and fruit

Circa: 1799

Watercolour on ivory

Ivory registration number: 2EXGFD1W

Gilt-metal mount

Oval, 42mm (1.65in) high

This flower girl from the 1790s wears typical clothing for children of this date – a white cotton dress and bonnet simply decorated with a blue sash and ribbons. Looser and more comfortable clothing came into fashion for toddlers from the 1760s, emerging from new beliefs (largely perpetuated by Jean Jacques Rousseau following earlier ideas sown by John Locke in the 17th century). Rousseau suggested that it was far healthier for children to wear lighter layers in washable clothing, with clothing ending at the ankles to allow for free movement once the child was walking.

The coloured sash worn by the child here was not indicative of gender – with the most common colours being pink or blue. Although white might seem like an impractical colour, the cottons could be boiled. In the winter, the sitter in this portrait would have worn wool – but the flowers and white muslin dress show that this portrait was painted in the warmer months.

As with so much in this period, fashion for children and adults was dictated by the French, who by the date of the present portrait were at the start of their Revolution. This period of the 1780s/90s also shows adult women aping the fashion which had been the preserve of children. The actress Mary Robinson (known as Perdita after her most famous role) wore a white muslin dress sent her by Marie Antoinette, which became 'the universal rage'. Scandalously worn by the Queen of France in a publicly displayed portrait, the English press called it the 'Perdita chemise' or "robe de la reine," after Marie-Antoinette.

The likely artist of this portrait, Jean-Antoine Laurent, was born in Baccarat, where he became a pupil of Jean François Durand (b. 1731) and of Jean-Baptiste Charles Claudot (1733–1805). He began to exhibit at the Paris Salon in 1791, and was subsequently patronised by Empress Joséphine, Queen Hortense, Louis XVIII, and the duchess of Berry. He died of apoplexy, allegedly brought on by the announcement that he had been made a chevalier of the Légion d'Honneur in 1832.