

THE LIMNER COMPANY



JOHN SMART (1742 - 1811)

Portrait miniature of a Gentleman, wearing dark brown coat and acid-green waistcoat trimmed with gold braid

Circa: 1780

1780

Watercolour on ivory (licence AQYJWYXF)

Oval, 5 cm (2 inches) high

Signed with initials 'JS/ 1780'

Smart is often portrayed as rather a joyless workaholic of an artist, but his creativity can be seen in his keen use of colour, showing fashionable Georgians in surprisingly bright hues. While his contemporary Richard Cosway's palette is pastel shades and blues, Smart gives a glimpse of the peacock colours worn at the time. Pink, bright green and canary yellow were all worn by men, the brightest shades peaking at the time that Smart painted this portrait of an unknown gentleman. The gold braiding and fine buttons suggest that this is a sitter of a high rank in society – his formal powdered wig contrasting with his jet-black eyebrows.

Georgian and Regency colours were often named for events – Magazines like *La Belle Assemblée*, *Ackermann's Repository*, the *Ladies' Monthly Museum* and others reflect a Regency fashion industry quick to exploit the interests of the day. Themes such as Egyptology, foreign travel, and the prolonged war against Napoleon all inspired both fashion and the dominant colours. Napoleon was a particular inspiration and hot on the heels of a splendid victory at Vitoria, for example, the *Lady's Monthly Museum* (August 1813) declared:

“VARIETY, flitting from hue to hue, from costume to costume, reigns paramount in the habiliments of the English female; our couturières are not insensible of British valour, well knowing, that, next to military glory, the British fair is the prize for which Britons fight; every trophy, colour, or device, that can eulogize

the Hero of Salamanca, of Ciudad Rodrigo, and Badajoz, is therefore adopted with avidity by the Ladies, in honour of his exploits.”

Smart was one of the most sought after artists of the 1780s and in 1785 made the monumental decision to head to India. His clientele, often drawn from the wealthy merchant classes, were often closely linked to the East India Company and in April 1785 he sailed for Madras with his eldest daughter Anna-Maria. Arriving in September of the same year, he ran a successful studio and was in huge demand with both European and Indian sitters – a newspaper report of circa 1788 stating that he was ‘so earnestly courted that none of the Chiefs will submit to be painted by any other artist.’