# THE LIMNER COMPANY



**Lady Emily Charlotte Ponsonby (1817 - 1877)**

**Group portrait of the Ponsonby family, with a girl painting a portrait of a member of the family**

Circa: Circa 1832

Circa 1832

6.5 x 10 cm (2 $^{1}/_{2}$ x 4 inches)

Watercolour on ivory, inscription to the support, verso, identifying the sitters

This interesting group portrait miniature centres around John Ponsonby, 4th Earl Bessborough, at the time likely known as Viscount Duncannon. Surrounding him are five women, one of whom is painting the sister standing directly in front of her, likely to be Augustinia Lavinia Priscilla Ponsonby (1814-1904). John had married Lady Maria Fane in 1805, and the couple went on to have eight sons and six daughters. The reverse of the image has a label suggesting that the sitters of the portrait are John, four of his daughters, and his wife. His six daughters were Georgiana Sarah (1807-1861), Augustina Lavinia Priscilla (1814-1904), Emily Charlotte Mary (1817-1877), Maria Jane Elizabeth (1819-1897), Harriet Frederica (1825-1900), and Kathleen Louisa Georgina (1826-1863). The earliest date that this group portrait could have been painted is 1832, given that the youngest girl of the painting appears to be at least thirteen, and John's fourth youngest daughter, Maria, would have turned thirteen in this year.

It is possible that the portrait was meant to commemorate the marriage or engagement of Augustinia Lavinia, who married just after her mother had died in 1834. Given this, it would have been painted just before Lady Maria Fane died. The daughter painting is likely to be either Emily or Maria, though Emily would be more likely, given that she was known for being an author of several books and may have been one of the more creative daughters from the group.

The Ponsonby family held a very fine collection throughout the first half of the 18th century, one which included works by Titian, Poussin, Murillo, Rembrandt and Watteau, and the 4th Earl's father had been a patron of Jean-Étienne Liotard in the 1780s. The collection also included a large number of portraits by Rosalba Carriera, and it is likely that whichever of the Ponsonby daughters that painted our work was

well-versed in the history of art and conscious of their following (to some degree) in a well-established tradition, hence the somewhat anachronistic attire of the sitters and the composition. The sitters almost appear to be in fancy dress, shunning the conventional clothing of the 1830s.

This last element, the composition, is an unusual and rather sophisticated one, particularly for an amateur hand, and is reminiscent of at least one much earlier work, which may have served as inspiration to the artist. The painting in question is Sofononisba Anguissola's Self-Portrait of 1656 (see fig. II below) which, as a relatively rare self-portrait by a female artist of that time (and one reproduced in various formats in the ensuing centuries, see fig. III for an example from the late 18th century) would have been particularly appropriate as a reference for our painting. There is in fact a record of a Self-Portrait by Anguissola having once been in the Ponsonby family collection, which was sold by the 3rd Earl at Christie's in 1801. This work appeared afterwards in Edward Coxe's sale of 1807, where the dimensions given were 4 x 3in, ruling out the various extant examples in Poland and Italy, nor is it the miniature now in the MFA Boston (which was in Richard Gough's collection from October 1801). Although it was sold prior to the date our work was painted, it is possible that the composition at least was known to the artist and of familial interest.

Another example of an early self-portrait by a female artist which, though perhaps not known to the hand behind the present work, nevertheless makes for an intriguing comparison, is Catharina van Hemessen's self-portrait, which also contains an only-partially painted portrait. That work holds an extremely important position in the broader Western canon as one of, if not the earliest extant self-portraits in Europe. It is all the more special for depicting a wonderfully confident female professional artist, with the signature translating to 'I Catharina van Hemessen, painted this at the age of twenty'.