THE LIMNER COMPANY



CONSTANTINA COLTELLINI (Fl.1803 - 1819)

Portrait miniature of a Young Gentleman holding a book in his left hand and leaning on a chair back

Circa: 1807

1807

8.7 cm (3 $^{3}/_{8}$ inches)

Watercolour on ivory

Gold frame (585 / 14k gold)

Signed and dated, ‘Coltellini 1807’

Updated 20th March 2025, with thanks to Viviana Castelli for additional biographical information on the artist.

Records on Constantina Coltellini are scarce and her surviving works are also few. The Coltellini family were from the Tuscan port city of Livorno (often called Leghorn in English). Her father, Marco Coltellini (1724-1777) initially joined the church before he began work in the print trade to support his growing family. He had a great interest in opera, later becoming a librettist and even taking to the stage himself. Constantina was one of four artistic daughters, of whom the most well-known was Celeste (1760-1828), an opera singer who rose to considerable fame across Eurpoe. Her other sisters, Anetta and Rosina, were also a singer and painter respectively.

Constantina is said to have lived in Florence where she was elected a professor at the Academy of Design Arts in 1781. An inscription on an 1837 print after her portrait of Neapolitan composer Domenico Cimarosa (1749 –1801) [Municipal Library of Trento, GI 1 v. c 96-040] gives her name as ‘Signora Coltellini’ - her title here used as an honorific of her professional rather than marital status.

Coltellini's earliest extant miniature can be found in the collection of Museum Rotterdam: a portrait of Jean-Baptiste baron Olivier (Strasbourg 1765 - Witternesse 1813), which is signed and dated 1803 [inv. no. 11398]. Other known miniatures depict sitters of various nationalities including British, American and numerous prominent Italian figures. Both her sister, Celeste and father (who died in suspicious circumstances in St Petersburg) travelled and it may have been that Constantina took her trade abroad also. Or perhaps, like her earlier Venetian counterpart, Rosalba Carriera (1673-1757), Constantina was visited in her native country by tourists on a European Grand Tour.

Coltellini's miniatures can be of variable quality and the present work is outstanding in its sophistication. As one of her best-preserved examples, it showcases a delicate stippling in the flesh of the face and hands, masterfully contrasted with the technique used on the clothing and background. This flattering modelling of the sitter's features is complemented by the highly fashionable hairstyle 'a la Titus' and swaggering pose - he appears to be sat astride a chair, in a startlingly casual attitude that would have been unseemly in a formal oil portrait. This informal composition would only be captured in the miniature format, and no doubt part of a flirtatious exchange with the intended recipient of this miniature.