THE LIMNER COMPANY



NICHOLAS DIXON (1660 - 1708)

A Lady, wearing white silk dress over white lace chemise, pearl and diamond clusters at her corsage and shoulder, blue cloak, further pearls at her neck and drop earrings; circa 1675

Circa: Circa 1675

Watercolour on vellum

Oval, 60 mm (2 1/3 in) high

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the present miniature has long been thought to be a portrait of the infamous Nell Gwyn, mistress of King Charles II. Nicholas Dixon succeeded the short tenure held by Richard Gibson, following the long career of Samuel Cooper, as King's Limner to Charles II in 1673. Despite his obscure origins and apparent intermittent poverty (he is documented as paying the 'poor rate' from his London home in the 1670s) he belongs, in style and quality, to the small, distinctive circle of Restoration court miniaturists, and was adept at transferring to miniature the languorous court beauties portrayed on the King's walls by Peter Lely and Godfrey Kneller.

The present miniature can be dated to Dixon's time at court, when he would have been granted the patronage of this elite assemblage. Although the sitter in this portrait is unknown, her gown and jewels mark her as a wealthy noblewoman. The present work can be compared in quality to the portrait of an unknown lady in the Victoria and Albert Museum [P.4-1942], dated to c. 1675 (previously identified as Frances Theresa Stuart (1657-1701)). Similarly, the portrait now thought

to represent Anne Hyde, Countess of Ossory (d.1685) [Royal Collection 420938], sports a parallel dark background and monogram. At this date, Dixon was clearly entrenched in the task of producing fashionable portraits of the King's immediate circle, including his mistresses, imbuing his sitters with a sensuality that directly reflected the mood of the court.

Dixon was not only the King's Limner but also the Keeper of the King's Picture Closet and as such had

access to the royal collection of paintings. This portrait marks a high point of his career, as it would only be a matter of years before he had lost his royal appointment to Peter Cross (c. 1645-1724) in 1678. Dixon's work thereafter is often viewed as a decline from his glittering court career, ending with a lottery of his cabinet miniatures in 1698 that failed to attract public interest. The present miniature marks a point in Dixon's life of great prosperity and patronage to which, sadly, he was never able to return.

Exhibitions

London, South Kensington Museum, 1865, no. 1624 (as 'Nell Gwyn' lent by Walter, 5th Duke of Buccleuch (1806-1884)).