THE LIMNER COMPANY



GEORGE ENGLEHEART (1750 - 1829)

Lady Betty (Elizabeth) Foster (nee Hervey) (later Cavendish) (1757-1824); circa 1787

Circa: Circa 1787

Watercolour on ivory

Ivory registration number: M4ZB1DFK

Oval, 50mm. (2in.) high

The sitter in this portrait, Lady Elizabeth Foster, born Hervey and later Cavendish (from 1809), led an extremely interesting life, the story of which has since been told through films, books, and television. Born in Suffolk, her childhood was not a prosperous one. In 1776 she was married to Thomas Foster (d.1796), an Irish MP. She had two sons with Foster, but the marriage was not happy and soon ended.

Only a few years after her separation from Foster, she became acquainted with William Cavendish, 5th Duke of Devonshire, and his wife, Georgiana. Their relationship soon developed into a ménage à trois, and in 1786 Elizabeth gave birth to William's son. The affair had not ruined her relationship with Georgiana, however, and when the Duchess fell pregnant with another man's son, Elizabeth followed her in her exile. When Georgiana died in 1806, she named Elizabeth as the sole guardian of her papers, meaning that her future was secured. Only three years later, she married the Duke of Devonshire.

The trio became known due to the questions surrounding their relationship at the time, which has remained a subject of intrigue since. In 2008, the film 'The Duchess', featuring Kiera Knightley, Ralph Fiennes, and Hayley Atwell as Elizabeth, was released and follows the relationship from the perspective of Georgiana. For contemporaries, the gaudish and scandalous behaviour, particularly of Georgiana and Elizabeth, was often satirised and the subject of comment. Aside from being involved in this scandal, they were society hostesses, with Georgiana responsible for receptions at Chatsworth. This exposure meant that their relationship became well known in society. Both Elizabeth and Georgiana were painted by numerous important artists from the period, including Angelica Kauffman, who painted

Elizabeth only a year before this miniature is presumed to have been painted.

According to George Engleheart's fee book, he painted 3 portraits of a 'Forster, Lady E' in 1787. The miniature has previously been sold as by Henry Edridge, but sits much more comfortably within the oeuvre of Engleheart, and matches the other two portrait miniatures painted by him. Though the spelling of the surname is different, transcriptions of his fee book consistently spell the surname in this way, and there are no 'Fosters' included, and it is certain that he painted Foster. Historically, then, it has been assumed that the present work is one of those recorded to have been painted in this year.

This implies that there are two other existing versions of the same miniature, by Engleheart. The location of one of these is unknown. Another is recorded in an image from the Courtauld Institute. Last sold in 1958, this other version varies slightly from the present work given that Elizabeth's ribbon is much less vibrant. Intriguingly, this other version has the initials GD and EF on the reverse, likely to stand for Georgiana Devonshire and Elizabeth Foster. The present version is the third, illustrated in Dorothy Stuart's 1955 book 'Dearest Bess'.[1] Stuart quotes in the illustrated table[2] that this miniature, as family lore goes, was continuously carried around by her illegitimate son with the 5th Duke of Devonshire, Augustus Clifford, who was born the year after it was produced. Therefore, it is possible that these three miniatures were commissioned by Elizabeth for her loved ones, the version sold in 1958 intended for Georgiana and the lost version for William, and that the present version was intended to be given to Augustus.

Though there is no further evidence for this theory, it would make sense given the nature of the relationship between the Duke, Duchess, and Bess. At this point in time the affections felt by the Duke for Bess were only increasing, emphasised by the distance created by her leaving in 1788 to give birth to Clifford.

The identification of works by George Engleheart is helped greatly by the fact that he recorded many of his sitters in his fee book, which has since been transcribed. Born at Kew in 1750, Engleheart was one of the most well-known and successful miniaturists of his day. He enjoyed commissions from many important members of society, including King George III. The present work hails from the period of Engleheart's career during which he had become well-established and was in high demand for his likenesses. This example, being a copy of a larger portrait by Reynolds, is somewhat unusual, but the artist is unlikely to have wanted to turn down a commission from such an important patron.

[1] Dorothy Stuart, Dearest Bess: The Life and Times of Lady Elizabeth Foster, Afterwards Duchess of Devonshire, from Her Unpublished Journals and Correspondence, London, 1955, opp. p. 116. It should be noted that Stuart dates the miniature to 1788, however it can be assumed that Engleheart gave the correct date in his fee book.

[2] Ibid., p. XIII.

Literature:

Dorothy Margaret Stuart, Dearest Bess: The Life and Times of Lady Elizabeth Foster, afterwards Duchess of Devonshire from Her Unpublished Journals and Correspondence, London, 1955, ill. op. p. 116.