THE LIMNER COMPANY



WILLIAM GRIMALDI (1751 - 1830)

The Cavendish Children, probably Harriet (1785-1862) and Georgiana (1783-1858), as children; 1795

Circa: 1795

Watercolour on ivory

Ivory registration number: D3YU4H6J

Signed and dated ‘Grimaldi R.A. 1795’[1]

Gilt-metal frame

Oval, 78mm (3in) high

William Grimaldi, born in Shoreditch, London, in 1751, was known for copying the works of other artists, as he has done here. Specifically, he copied from multiple works by Joshua Reynolds (1723-1792), and it is recorded by the artist’s descendants that the present work is also a copy from a Reynolds composition, though this original composition has not been traced. Grimaldi trained under Thomas Worlidge (1700-1766), who is believed to have been the artist’s uncle.

The descendants of the artist record in their catalogue of his works that this miniature depicts ‘Lady Georgiana and Lady Harriot Cavendish’, the title coming from an inscription by William himself. Two miniatures of the same subject are listed in the catalogue. The first was painted in 1795 as a commission by the father of the sitters, William Cavendish, 5th Duke of Devonshire (1748-1811)[2]. The second, being this portrait, is recorded in the catalogue as being painted in 1796.[3] It appears, then, that Grimaldi had become attached to the image and decided that he wanted to keep a version of this for himself.

A closer look at the children in the portrait however, has led to the suggestion that this may not be a portrait of two daughters, but rather of Harriet and her younger brother William (1790- 1858). The ages

of these children would make more sense, given that they would be 5 and 10, respectively, matching the apparent age of the sitters here. Furthermore, the younger child wears what appears to be a skeleton suit, usually only worn by young boys in his period. However, given that the original title was taken from the artist directly, it should be assumed that the original identification was correct.

The children's parents, the 5th Duke and Duchess of Devonshire, are probably best known for their ménage-a-trois with Lady Elizabeth Foster (1758- 1824)[4], who would become their stepmother upon their mother's death in 1806. As the eldest child of the Duke and Duchess, Georgiana was a favourite of her mother, also Georgiana (1757-1806), and the intimate relationship between the two is recorded in a portrait by Reynolds, at Chatsworth House. In 1801, she was married to George Howard, Viscount Morpeth (1773-1848). Following the marriage, Georgiana lived at her husband's family home, Castle Howard, in North Yorkshire. Harriet was not as favoured as her sister, and was only married once her mother had died. In keeping with the complex and unconventional relationships of the Cavendish family, this was to her aunt's lover, Lord Granville Leveson Gower (1773-1846).

Despite the strange context of the match, the two had a loving relationship, and Harriet had even lived with Gower in Paris while he was an ambassador there. It is quoted that Harriet was 'no beauty, [but] she had wit, intelligence, and shrewdness'. William, as the only son of the Duke and Duchess, succeeded to the Dukedom upon his father's death in 1811. Aside from his numerous political positions, including Lord Chamberlain of the Household (1827-8, 1830-34 and Ambassador Extraordinary to the Russian Empire (1826), William had a passion for horticulture and was known for being extravagant and charming.[5]

These later lives are very far from the lives these children were living when this miniature was painted. It should be noted that Grimaldi was not the only portrait miniaturist to have painted the children of the Duke; multiple versions by Richard Cosway (1742-1811) are also known.[6] However, this miniature differs in its unfinished nature, which is likely to be because Grimaldi was painting it for himself. This gives the portrait a translucent quality, and the sky background is almost visible through the clothes of the two children.

[1] Grimaldi was not a Royal academician, but erroneously styled himself as a member of the Académie Royale (Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, 'Grimaldi, William').

[2] A.B. Grimaldi, 'A Catalogue, Chronological and Descriptive, of Paintings, Drawings, & Engravings by and after William Grimaldi', p. 17, no. 56.

[3] It should be noted that this date differs from that on the miniature itself. This is likely due to a previous misreading of the signature.

[4] The sitter of cat.no. 20.

[5] Chatsworth Website, William Spencer Cavendish, 6th Duke of Devonshire (1790-1858), accessed 26 March 2025.

[6] One of which was exhibited at the Royal Academy, London, Exhibition of British Art, 1934, no. 1054, lent by Earl Spencer, Althorp.

Exhibitions

London, An Evening Soiree at King's College, 1857;

London, Ironmongers Company Fine Art Exhibition, May 3-5 1861.

Literature:

A.B. Grimaldi, ‘A Catalogue, Chronological and Descriptive, of Paintings, Drawings, & Engravings by and after William Grimaldi’, p. 17, no. 56.