THE LIMNER COMPANY



RICHARD COSWAY (1742 - 1821)

Mary Frances (Fanny) Swinburne (1771-1828), wearing white dress with frilled trim to her decollete, pearl pendant earring, her powdered hair dressed with a strand of pearls and worn a la conseilleur; circa 1793

Circa: Circa 1793

Watercolour on ivory

Ivory registration number: USNH4PAA

Gilt-metal frame

Oval 76mm (2 11/16 in) high

Other versions

Cleveland Museum of Art, Edward B. Greene Collection, 1941.553.

Although it has been suggested that Richard Cosway painted Mary Frances (Fanny) Swinburne along with her parents the travel writer Henry Swinburne and his wife Martha in 1786, the hairstyle and clothing indicate this portrait was painted for her wedding in 1793 at the age of 21 or 22. Mary's future husband was Paul Benfield (1742-1810), a friend of Cosway's – and in fact the artist attended their wedding in September 1793 at St. George's in Hanover Square (he signed the marriage register for the couple).

The couple lived at the magnificent Neoclassical house Woodhall Park, Hertfordshire, after Benfield acquired it in 1794 (for the equivalent of £15,000,000 in today's money). Settling into married life with a huge dowry provided by her parents, Mary cannot have foreseen the dramatic financial ruin that was just around the corner. Benfield - an East India Company employee, financier and politician – was (perhaps generously) described as an 'adventurer'. He amassed a huge fortune in Madras where he was based from 1764, making his money partly by trade, partly by loans at high rates of interest, and partly through contracts.

Benfield was eventually charged with having aided and abetted the malcontents in the Madras council and he was ordered by the court of directors in 1777 to return to England, where an investigation cleared him. Edmund Burke, who had waged a long campaign over the corruption in the Company, gave a speech regarding the debts of the Nawab of the Carnatic which included an attack on Benfield in which he denounced him as ‘a criminal who long since ought to have fattened the region’s kites with his offal’.

This portrait of Mary by Cosway was painted at a time of huge optimism for the new Mrs Benfield. With her husband Paul settled in their grand estate in England, he had presented her with a ring on their wedding day worth £3000 (or around £500,000 today). However, their happiness was short-lived. While a son and two daughters were born to the couple, their fortune was funnelled into a mercantile firm in London, called Boyd, Benfield, & Co.. For a few years the new venture thrived, but by 1797 it had overreached itself and could not meet its obligations. On 8 March 1799 Boyd, Benfield & Co. was wound up and the partners were declared bankrupt the following year. Boyd gives a glimpse of Benfield’s personality, complaining that his ‘Temper, Disposition, Habits and Pursuits’ made him an impossible person with whom to do business. Mary’s husband, who had promised a secure and happy future, died in poverty in Paris in 1810, their home bought by the Nottingham banker Samuel Smith in 1801.

A version of this portrait, also by Richard Cosway, is part of the Edward B. Greene collection at Cleveland Museum of Art, USA [see ‘other versions’].

Literature:

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Cleveland Museum of Art, and Alan Chong. European & American Painting in the Cleveland Museum of Art: A Summary Catalogue. Cleveland, Ohio: Cleveland Museum of Art, 1993. p. 282;

Korkow, Cory, and Dario Robleto, Disembodied: Portrait Miniatures and Their Contemporary Relatives (2013), p.86;

Korkow, Cory, and Jon L. Seydl, British Portrait Miniatures: The Cleveland Museum of Art (2013), Cat. no. 64, pp. 247-249.