

WILLIAM MARSHALL CRAIG (c.1764 - 1829)

A Major of the 53rd (Shropshire) Regiment of Foot, with gold lace and epaulettes, a frilled cravat, and his hair powdered en queue; circa 1810-1816

Circa: circa 1810-1816

Watercolour on ivory

Gilt metal frame with blue silk reverse

Oval, 75mm (3in) high

In addition to his abilities in portrait and watercolour painting, William Marshall Craig was known for his ability to train and teach other artists. One of his students was Sarah Biffin (1784-1850), [see cat. no. 89], who was introduced to Craig just before the present portrait would have been painted.[1] Very few of his portrait miniatures are still known, making this portrait a rare example of his work outside of the artworks of his students. In 1812 he became watercolour painter to Queen Charlotte, and in 1815 he became both the drawing master to Princess Charlotte of Wales and painter to the Duke and Duchess of York. Records of his teaching materials exist, including Instructions for Drawing & Understanding the Human Figure (1817).[2]

Emma Rutherford has suggested that Craig was a ‘grounded, empathetic, and relatable instructor…’, and some of this empathy is reflected in the way Craig has depicted this gentleman.[3] Though his identity remains unknown, his uniform is of the 53rd (Shropshire) Regiment of Foot. Elements of the officer’s uniform provide evidence of the date at which this portrait was painted. The star on the strap of his left epaulette was an element introduced in 1810; it indicates that the sitter was a Major. Therefore, the present work must have been painted after that date and before the significant changes to the style of British infantry uniform coats in circa 1816.

The 53rd (Shropshire) Regiment of Foot was one of only two regiments to have scarlet coats faced with red and the only one of the two whose officers had their coats embellished with gold-laced, square-ended loops worn in pairs. In 1803, a second battalion of the regiment was raised; it was sent to the

Peninsular War (1808-14) in 1809. The first battalion, in existence since 1755, was stationed in India at the date of this miniature. There is no record of Craig travelling to India, so it is more likely that this major was of the second battalion.

We are grateful to Stephen Wood for his advice about the uniform in this portrait.

[1] See E. Rutherford, E. Smith (eds.), “Without Hands”: The Art of Sarah Biffin, Philip Mould & Company, 2022.

[2] Ibid., ill. p. 43.

[3] Ibid., p. 41.