

THE LIMNER COMPANY



GERVASE SPENCER (c.1715 - 1763)

A Lady, traditionally called the Artist's Wife, wearing a black lace dress with a white ruff, white puffed sleeves, and a black hat decorated with a white plume; 1749

Circa: 1749

Watercolour on ivory

Ivory registration number: E61DEP9Z

Signed with initials and dated 1749 on the obverse

Gold mount (the miniature was likely originally set into a patch or toothpick box)

Oval, 44mm (1.7in) high

This miniature is directly inspired by Peter Paul Rubens's (1577-1640) portrait of his second wife, Helena Fourment (1614-1673), now in the collection of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, Lisbon (fig.1) [1]. It may be because of this that the portrait was previously believed to be of Spencers' wife. Though she was drawn by her husband in 1768 [2], and there are some facial similarities, these are not clear enough to confirm this identification. Furthermore, Spencer is known to have copied the Rubens portrait multiple times in miniature, each with different sitters wearing the same costume as Fourment.

Other contemporary painters are also known to have painted copies of Rubens's work in miniature form. For example, a portrait of a lady by Joseph Highmore, sold in 2018, shows clear inspiration from *Le Chapeau de Paille* in the National Gallery [3]. It is important to note that these are not simply copies, but are adaptations of Rubens's work, with the addition of new sitters. In this example, some details have been removed and altered. The sitter here does not have her hand folded at her waist, and the dark, stormy sky of Rubens' composition has been replaced with a much brighter alternative. Such brightness is typical of the work of Spencer and is further reflected in the features of the sitter's costume. The collar depicted here is also much more restrained than that in the original portrait. Again, this is likely due to an issue of space.

The original portrait of Helena Fourment was held at Houghton Hall, Norfolk, and owned by Sir Robert Walpole in 1752 [4]. Spencer may have well seen the portrait itself, or an engraving of it, and decided that this was a good 'costume' to offer for his sitters to wear when having their portrait taken. It is also possible sitters were specifically requesting to be depicted in this fashion, and that a century after Rubens was painting, women were keen to be depicted in his 'Rubenesque' style. Interestingly, most of the miniatures painted in this style by Spencer were done in the 1740s, signalling a peak in interest in the portrait during this decade.

This decade was the first of Spencer's recorded career, and copying could have also been a means through which he was able to develop his own artistic skill. He is known for painting on both ivory and with enamel, and excelled in both of these forms. The British Museum also holds numerous drawings by the artist, including the aforementioned sketch of his wife, and a copy of his own portrait, painted by Joshua Reynolds (1723-1792).

[1] Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, Lisbon, Inventory Number 959.

[2] British Museum, Prints and Drawings, 1852,0214.365.

[3] National Gallery, London, Inventory Number NG852.

[4] It appears in an inventory from this date, and was later purchased by Catherine II of Russia, alongside other paintings from Walpole's collection.