THE LIMNER COMPANY



ANDREW ROBERTSON (1777 - 1845)

Portrait miniature of a Lady, probably Frances (‘Fanny’) Maria Kelly (1790-1882) wearing a coral coloured dress trimmed with white lace

Circa: 1812

1812

Oval, 3 in. high

Watercolour on ivory

Ivory registration number: G5VNCS8M

Signed on the obverse and reverse: 'painted by/A. Robertson/33 Gerrard Str/1812'

The identification of the lady in this portrait as Frances Maria Kelly comes from a comparison to a drawing of her in the National Portrait Gallery by Thomas Unwin[1]. Though no other record of a miniature portrait by Robertson of Miss Kelly exists, the facial comparison between the two portraits is rather convincing. Particularly, the curled stands of hair that frame the actress’s face have been replicated. The majority of other representations of Kelly show her in different characters that she played throughout her career, which began at the age of nine[2], and ended in 1835[3]. She was recognised as being talented[4] and even opened her own school in 1883, originally called ‘Miss Kelly’s Theatre[5]. She opened the school to allow young girls to gain training in the dramatic arts. In 1840, the doors of the theatre opened, and it was now renamed ‘The Royalty’, and home to an amateur theatre company.

Frances’s talent attracted the attention of many, particularly that of young gentlemen of the period. It is said that she received many proposals, including one by Charles Lamb in 1819[6]. Only a year before the proposal, he had written a sonnet about the actress:

‘You are not, Kelly, of the common strain,

That stoop their pride and female honor down

To please that many-headed beast, the town,

And vend their lavish smiles and tricks for gain;

By fortune thrown amid the actor's train,

You keep your native dignity of thought;

The plaudits that attend you come unsought,

As tributes due unto your natural vein.

Your tears have passion in them, and a grace

Of genuine freshness, which our hearts avow;

Your smiles are winds whose ways we cannot trace,

That vanish and return we know not how —

And please the better from a pensive face,

And thoughtful eye, and a reflecting brow.'[7]

She had also received a proposal from the stalker George Barnett, who, upon seeing Kelly play in one of her well-known 'breeches roles' in 1816 (in which she played a male character), decided against his affections and attempted to shoot her. He missed, and, understandably, the proposal was not accepted.

If Kelly is indeed the sitter in the portrait, then it is not surprising that a popular miniature painter such as Andrew Robertson would want to paint Kelly or was commissioned to do so. Born in Scotland, Robertson trained under Alexander Naysmyth (1758-1840), and moved to London, where he would exhibit at the Royal Academy, British Institution, and Society of Painters in Watercolours. When this portrait was painted, he had spent time as the miniature painter to the Duke of Sussex, meaning that many of his miniatures can be found in the Royal Collection today.

[1] Thomas Unwins, Frances ('Fanny') Maria Kelly, Chalk, 1822, NPG 1971.

[2] This is the age given in The Lady's Monthly Museum, June, 1812. Her uncle was famous actor Michael Kelly, who appears to have given her her first roles in theatre.

[3] According to The Regency Reader, https://regrom.com/2021/06/04/regency-women-of-character-francis-maria-kelly/.

[4] Something emphasised in the article on her in The Lady's Monthly Museum, June 1812.

[5] Pictures of the theatre can be found on British History Online, https://www.british-history.ac.uk/survey-london/vols33-4/plate-30. The building was on Dean Street, and is now destroyed.

[6] This proposal was only discovered in 1903, when the letters in which Lamb proposed were discovered. For a more in-depth explanation of the story of Lamb and Kelly, see A.E. Newton's article from The Atlantic, 1918, available online: https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1918/05/what-might-have-been-an-episode-in-the-life-of-charles-lamb/645974/.

[7] Published in the Works of Lamb, 1818.