THE LIMNER COMPANY



CHARLES SHIRREFF (b.c. 1750 -)

Portrait of a Gentleman wearing a steel grey coat, with a white waistcoat and jabot with glazed hair reverse

Circa: circa 1790

circa 1790

Watercolour on ivory (licence PKXXZS8X)

Oval, 67mm (2 5/8 in) high

Gold locket frame

At the age of four, Charles Shirreff lost his ability to speak and hear. This did not prevent him from developing his artistic skill, which allowed him to enrol at the R.A. schools in 1768, moving away from Scotland, where he was born. Much of his life is recorded in an article by William Foster in the Walpole Society Journal [1]. A decade after his enrollment at the R.A. schools, he had been granted permission to travel to India with his sister and father, however, he would not take up this opportunity until the end of 1795. India was a popular destination for many portrait miniature painters, who felt that they would gain more commissions amongst the British citizens residing there [2].

The sitter of this portrait is unknown. However, a previous dating of the portrait to 1790 suggests that this gentleman was painted during Shirreff's stay in Bath at the start of this decade, before he travelled to India. The composition of the portrait is rather unusual in comparison to others by Shirreff, especially given that many of his sitters were officers or depicted in military dress. Here, the gentleman sits in front of a draped curtain, and a tree can be seen in the background beyond. The artist's distinctive use of cross-hatching across the features of the sitter and the background is evident here. This creates a sense of lightness across the miniature, especially in the sitter's hair and his facial expression, seemingly captured in a brief moment, with his lips slightly apart.

[1] W. Foster, British Artists in India, The Volume of the Walpole Society, vol. 19, pp.67-69.

[2] For example, John Smart (1741-1811), and Diana Hill (1760-1844) also moved there.