THE LIMNER COMPANY



SAMUEL SHELLEY (1750/56 - 1808)

Portrait miniature of a Young Lady with a blue and white dress, with very curly hair

Circa: Circa 1780

Circa 1780

Watercolour on ivory

Ivory registration number: YXXM9UJE

With a hairwork reverse, featuring the initials EJ

Oval, 55 mm (2 1/5 in) high

The young sitter of this portrait, who remains unidentified, is adorned with many of the flamboyant fashions of the last decades of the eighteenth century. Both her wild, almost unkempt wig and heavily ruffled collar stand as reminders of the influence that French fashions had in Britain in this period. Many of these were inspired by Queen Marie Antoinette (1755-1793), so much in fact that the fashionable height of headdresses seems to have been determined by how much hair the French Queen had to style them with [1]. Here, the young sitter has, as has been mentioned, rather wild hair. This is less structured and decorated than the widely satirised wigs of the beginning of the 1780s and allows the miniature to be dated to circa 1785.

Shelley has placed a clear emphasis on the youth of this sitter. She has wide brown eyes and rather flushed cheeks (likely the product of large amounts of rouge). Nothing else is known about the sitter, given that the only identification comes from the initials on the back of the miniature, ‘E J’. Whether she was a young girl dressed up as a woman, or vice versa, it is clear that Shelley intended to make her look as attractive and fashionable as possible.

A perusal through the works of Samuel Shelley brings up many portraits of women in similar fashions and emphasises his talent in portraying them. He was born in London and remained there throughout his life, exhibiting at the Royal Society of Artists and the R.A. Shelley was known not only for his talent in miniature painting but also in illustrations, oil paintings, and engravings. Furthermore, it is known that he taught younger artists, including Andrew Robertson (1772-1841) and Edward Nash (1778-1821).

[1] R. Corson, in Fashions in Hair, remarks that French fashion changed when the Queen lost her hair suddenly, but that ‘As the Queen’s hair grew again, so did the head-dresses.’ (p.354).