

THE LIMNER COMPANY



RICHARD COSWAY (1742 - 1821)

Portrait of William Joseph Denison (1770-1849), facing right, in a blue coat, with a white waistcoat and cravat

Circa: c.1785-1795

Watercolour on ivory

Gilt-metal frame

Oval, 8 cm (3 ⅛ in) high

Before entering a series of salerooms in the second half of the twentieth century, this portrait had remained within the collection of the family of the sitter, William Joseph Denison. Denison was born in London to a cloth merchant and banker, Joseph Denison (c.1726-1806), and his wife, Elizabeth (née Butler). Though they had moved away, the Denison family had northern roots; William's paternal grandfather had lived in Leeds as a woollen cloth maker and dissenter. Other portraits of William exist, including one by Frederick Richard Say, which hangs in the Reform Club, Pall Mall [1].

The style and handling of this portrait suggest that it was painted in the late 1780s or early 1790s, when William was working for his father's firm, Denison, Hayward, and Kennard of Lombard Street. Only a few years later, he would begin his political career and was elected as MP of Camelford in 1796. He remained an MP throughout his life, with his final seat being Surrey, from 1818 until his death.

Denison must have been too focused on building a successful career to have burdened himself with thoughts of matrimony, and he died unwed in 1849. His wealth at this time was estimated to be £2.3 million, making him one of the wealthiest men in Britain. The entirety of his fortune, including the present work, was left to his nephew, Lord Albert Denison, first Baron Londesborough, his sole heir.

For Richard Cosway, important patrons such as Denison played a key role in building a reputation for

his miniatures. Cosway had trained at William Shipley's Drawing School and had been sent to London before he was twelve to undertake this study. As a successful artist, he became the miniature painter to the Prince of Wales. His portraits often depict important figures from British society, and have distinct styles according to different points in his life. As has already been mentioned, the style of the present work allows it to be dated to the 1780s/90s, and this suggestion comes from the lightness of the colours and sky background of the portrait. Furthermore, many of his male subjects from this period are depicted with a similar outfit to William's here.

[1] A Mezzotint after this portrait by William Giller can be found in the National Portrait Gallery's collection, NPGD35019.