

THE LIMNER COMPANY



ENGLISH SCHOOL

Mr Thomas James (1780-1853) and his wife, Mary Ann (nee Watkyns) (d. 1860), in an embrace

Circa: Circa 1809

Circa 1809

Watercolour on ivory

Ivory licence: WGKP3AL3

Gold frame with pearl border; hair work in the reverse

Oval, 8.5 cm (3 ³/₈ in) high

The present miniature must be one of the most intimate double portraits painted in the early years of the nineteenth century. The young couple, clearly in love and possibly painted on their wedding day, embrace each other closely. The couple's heads are touching, their arms wrapped around each other (hers over her new husband's shoulder, in a move that could be deemed traditionally masculine in its possessiveness). The couple's matching 'a la Titus' short haircuts mark them as following the most progressive fashion trends. So many marriages of this era are viewed as matches engineered by the older generations - to see what would appear to be a genuine love match evokes the happy endings of the novels of Jane Austen (1775-1817).

The portrait has been the subject of numerous attributions in the past. Before being sold as a Stroely in Edward Grosvenor Paine's 1979 sale, it was known as a miniature by Richard Cosway or Andrew Plimer. The technique does not suggest the hand of Andrew nor his brother Nathaniel and instead we suggest that the work was painted by an unknown artist, possibly even by Mary Ann herself. As Austen, who herself attempted to paint portrait miniatures, states, they are a challenging form of portraiture, complaining that 'the little bit (two inches wide) of Ivory on which I work with so fine a Brush, as produces little effect after much Labour?' [1]. Even so, many women attempted to paint portrait miniatures on ivory, some with more success than others. The slightly awkward placement of the figures in the present portrait may suggest an artist with no formal training, but in other areas, such as the expressive faces,

the background (with a Cosway-esque blue sky) and the drapery, the artist shows a great deal of skill.

This double portrait is listed as by Andrew Plimer in George Williamson's *Andrew and Nathaniel Plimer* (1903), a book which illustrates the miniature and provides some information about the sitters in the portrait. In his book, Williamson discusses the intimate connections between the miniature and the artist Andrew Plimer. However, the 'Dr and Mrs James' identified as the sitters (who were family friends of Andrew Plimer) do not fit with the dates of the double portrait. Dr Thomas James was the godfather of Andrew Plimer's only son, Andrew and the headmaster of Rugby School between 1778 and 1794.

Given that Dr Thomas James was born in 1748 and died in 1804, he cannot be the same man portrayed in the present work.

It can instead be suggested that this is a portrait of Dr Thomas James' son, also Thomas James. He was born in 1780, and married Mary Ann Watkins in 1809. Instead of following in his father's footsteps and entering the world of education, Thomas Jnr. became a lawyer. One biographer described him as having 'a lack of ambition', but states he was known as a good lawyer and admired for his social charm [2]. The same source quotes Mary as having been adopted by her aunt at a young age. Given the date of their marriage, it is possible that this miniature was painted to commemorate this occasion.

[1] From a letter in the British Library, MS 89437.

[2] 'A History of the Ray Jones Family', <https://family.ray-jones.org.uk/rootspersona-tree/thomas-james/>, accessed 05/02/2025.

Literature:

G. Williamson, *Andrew and Nathaniel Plimer*, London, 1903, ill. op. p.65 (see fig.1).