THE LIMNER COMPANY



ALEXANDER COOPER (1609/12 - 1660)

Portrait miniature of an unknown Gentleman, wearing a black 'pinked' doublet, lace lawn collar with a gold ring tied to the tasseled ends, his hair worn with a fringe; circa 1630s

Circa: Circa 1630s

Circa 1630s

4.7 cm (1 $^{7}/_{8}$ inches)

Watercolour and bodycolour on vellum

Gilt metal, spiral-crested case

It is probable that the unknown sitter of this portrait was a Dutch nobleman, possibly of the court of Elizabeth of Bohemia (1596-1662). Alexander Cooper had accompanied Elizabeth in her exile from England to The Hague, and painted numerous series of portraits of her family here. If the gentleman depicted here was not a member of the court, then he was certainly someone with some social standing.

There are a few distinctive features within the portrait. One can be seen in the style of the sitter's hair. He has a fringe, which is not completely unknown in the period, in fact Elizabeth's husband, Frederick V, is often depicted with a similar style. It is possible that his choice to have a similar style comes from the fact that he was present in the 'Winter King's' court. Furthermore, our sitter wears a gold ring, not on his hands (which do not fit in to the composition here), but instead on a black string around his neck. Again, this is not a completely unusual fashion choice, but is one that potentially reveals some information about the otherwise unknown sitter.

As far back as the sixteenth century, there is evidence of rings being worn in unconventional ways. Antonis Mor (1515-1575/6) painted Sir Henry Lee (1568, NPG 2095) with a ring on his thumb, which was otherwise attached to a string hung around his neck, much like in the portrait here. In the period of

the present work's creation, Antony van Dyck (1599-1641) adorns Thomas Killigrew (1612-1683) with a ring worn on a string around his wrist. It has been suggested that rings were worn in these ways to symbolise either love or male friendships. The gentleman in this portrait miniature is likely to be showing his love to the recipient of the artwork, whether platonic or romantic. Scarisbrick, in her book dedicated to the history of rings, notes that the string tied to these pieces of jewellery may have also been used to prevent rings too large for the owner's finger from falling off.[1]

Portrait miniatures by Alexander Cooper are rare, but demonstrate a phenomenal level of skill. As the younger brother of Samuel Cooper (1607/8-1672) he had also trained under their uncle, John Hoskins, who had adopted the pair. It has also been suggested that Alexander was apprenticed to Peter Oliver (1606-1688), and it is from this information that the stylistic differences between the two brothers, Samuel having trained only under his uncle, emerge. The fact that Alexander followed Elizabeth Bohemia to The Hague in her exile is evidenced by the fact that he painted numerous sets of portraits of her family, including those contained in the hinged bracelet found in Berlin.

[1] D. Scarisbrick, Rings: Symbols of Wealth, Power and affection, London, 1993, p. 75.