THE LIMNER COMPANY



SAMUEL COOPER (1607/8 - 1672)

Portrait miniature of Henry Alexander, 4th Earl of Stirling (d.1691)

Circa: circa 1666

circa 1666

Watercolour and bodycolour on vellum

Oval, 6.8 cm (2 $^{5}/_{8}$ inches) high

Signed with monogram ‘SC’

This sitter, Henry Alexander, was the fourth Earl of Stirling, the first having been his grandfather, William (1577-1640), who was awarded the title by King Charles I (1600-1649) in the honour list that occurred alongside Charles’ coronation as the King of Scotland. This honour was conferred onto Henry Alexander’s grandfather as a reward for his loyalty to King James VI of Scotland, later James I of England (1574-1619), proven by William’s move to London with the later King, where he was recognised as Secretary of State for Scotland. William also entangled the family with a third king, King Charles II (1630-1685), by dedicating his poem Paraenesis (1604) to Charles II when he was a young prince. The poem was an instructive polemic on the ways a monarch ought to turn to literature, good counsel and moral virtue in order to reign successfully, directions that King Charles II, with his notorious merry-making, appears to have held lightly. Though the family’s prestige waned over the years, partly due to the debts William acquired, the social capital he accumulated by way of these relationships with the royals did ensure that Henry Alexander’s above portrait was painted by Samuel Cooper, the King’s private limner.

Samuel Cooper is lauded as one of the greatest miniaturists of the seventeenth century, earning himself attributions such as “‘the prince of limners’, ‘the Vandyck in little’, he ‘first who gave the strength and freedom of oil to miniatures’ and he who could ‘equal if not exceed the very best in Europe’”.[1] Cooper, raised along his brother Alexander Cooper who later also became a celebrated miniature painter, came from a great lineage of miniaturists. Cooper’s uncle was court miniaturist John Hoskins the elder (c.1590-1665), who himself learnt his craft through meticulous studies of the great court painter Anthony

van Dyck (1599-1641). Similarly, Samuel Cooper's style was heavily influenced by detailed examinations of van Dyck's work, culminating in his own appointment as limner to the King in 1663, an arrangement via which the above portrait of Henry Alexander came to exist. Prior to this royal engagement, Cooper had operated during the Civil War and Commonwealth period and his patronage ranged from various Parliamentarians to Oliver Cromwell himself. Such breadth of work and influence is partly what earnt Cooper such universal high-esteem, with the artist Charles Beale (1632-1705) writing that Cooper had been 'the most famous limner in the word for a face'. He was said to be 'good company' by Samuel Pepys and to have been well-liked by many of his sitters, despite the tumultuous political times in which he lived and the differing allegiances of many of his clientele. In fact, it is believed that Oliver Cromwell 'together with his family, seems to have sat to him oftener than anyone else', yet this did not appear to impair Cooper's career at the Restoration and he painted a number of miniatures of Charles II.[2]

The above portrait, painted c. 1666, is from the earlier years of Cooper's royal employment, throughout which Cooper regularly produced portraits of members of notable national families. As an important Scottish nobleman whose family had been historically close to the royals, Henry Alexander formed part of that elite. The portrait typifies Cooper's preference for replicating honest likenesses and using naturalistic palette tones, as evidenced in the above portrait's brown and greyer hues. Although sombre in colour, Henry Alexander's remarkable wig also reflects another 17th century trend. Popular contemporary male hair standards preferred neatly-arranged curly hair that reached down to the mid-chest, as in the above portrait. Given that such wigs began 'from £3, the equivalent of about two months' wages for a labourer', they were a marker of 'gentlemen' and their social standing, highlighting Henry Alexander's status.[3]

This miniature was put up for sale at Sotheby's on the 21st May 2019 as part of the auction 'Style: Private Sales'.

[1] Roy Cooper, 'Samuel Cooper: an Appreciation', in Daphne Foskett, Samuel Cooper 1609-1672 (London: Faber and Faber, 1974), p. 9.

[2] J.J Foster, Samuel Cooper and the English Miniature Painters of the XVII Century (London: Dickinson, 1914), p. 25

[3] Daphne Foskett, Samuel Cooper and his Contemporaries (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1974), p. xxiii).

Literature:

Bennet & Son, Valuation of Miniatures, Medals & Curios for Captain A Hill of Welford Bray Co. Dublin, 11 December 1896, p.1; 'The Earl of Stirling by S. Cooper / £42'