THE LIMNER COMPANY



CORNELIUS JOHNSON (1593 - 1661)

Portrait miniature of a Gentleman, wearing black doublet slashed to reveal white silk and large, lace edged collar; circa 1620

Circa: Circa 1620

Circa 1620

9.5 cm (3 $^{3}/_{4}$ inches) high

Oil on silver

This portrait, attributable to Cornelis Jonson van Ceulen or Johnson (his anglicised name), shows a wealthy gentleman in a black silk doublet and fine lace-edged lawn collar. Painted circa 1620, this small oil is one of the earliest examples of Johnson painting 'in little' (this is how his work was described by the writer Bainbrigg Buckeridge in 1706 - 'an excellent Painter both in great and little'). [1]

Johnson's work 'in little' appears to be divisible into two distinct phases – the present work hails from his earlier phase, a more experimental and ambitious than the smaller works painted after 1630. When the present work was painted, Johnson was recently married (1622) and was living in the London parish of St Ann, Blackfriars. Other works which date from this phase would include his portrait of Dudley North, 4th Baron North (1602-1677), dated 1627[2] and an unknown gentleman, in silver-embroidered grey doublet (now in a private collection but previously Christie's, London, 20 November 2007).

The present portrait is comparable in date to the flamboyant portrait of an unknown man in the collection of Art Gallery NSW by Frans Pourbus (1569-1622). The art historian Karen Hearn, who has written extensively on Johnson, observes that Johnson's miniatures share many qualities with his easel portraits – a refined technique, and a detailed rendition of costume, especially lace. One feature which is unusual in the present work is the depiction of the lace lifting at the back of the collar. This would have been a challenge to allow this to remain starched into position, or it may have been wired to hold in place – either way, it was a detail worthy of careful depiction by the artist.

After 1630, his miniaturised oils fall into a recognisable format, as though Johnson had found a successful formula. These works often show the sitter low in the frame, bearing Johnson's characteristic large eyes and a highlight on the sitter's nose. Johnson may have begun employing assistants and apprentices in a workshop around this time, as, on 5 December 1632 he was appointed Charles I's 'servant in ye quality of Picture Drawer'. Earlier the same year, Anthony van Dyck had arrived in London and had begun to work for Charles I, who had knighted him on 5 July, and had appointed him 'principalle Paynter in Ordinary to their Majesties'. However ambitious Johnson may have been, the overwhelming success of Van Dyck must have presented him with a considerable challenge in retaining patronage.

Van Dyck's death in December 1641 might have cleared the way for Johnson to stake his claim as London's principal artist but the political situation was deteriorating, and the King and Court left London early in 1642. In October 1643 Johnson and his family emigrated to the northern Netherlands, where his career had a second blossoming, as a leading portrait painter until his death in Utrecht in 1661.

[1] Taken from Karen Hearn, The Small Oil Colour Pictures of Cornelius Johnson (1593 – 1661), from Portrait Miniatures, Artists, Functions & Collections, The Tansey Miniatures Foundation, London 2018, p. 180.

[2] Most recently with the Weiss Gallery, London.