

THE LIMNER COMPANY



SAMUEL BERNARD (1615 - 1687)

Portrait miniature of a Lady of the French court, possibly Hortense Mancini, Duchess of Mazarin (1646-1699), wearing an orange dress with blue ribbon details, pearl necklace, her dark hair worn curled with ringlets falling over her shoulders

Circa: circa 1676

circa 1676

Watercolour and bodycolour on paper

Oval, 3.5 cm (1 ³/₈ inches) high

Gilt metal frame with scroll top

At the time of production, this miniature was part of a larger group of miniatures by Samuel Bernard, all depicting members of the court of Louis XIV. It can be inferred that the sitters in these portraits, including the present work, must have held intimate connections to the King, and it is from this that the possible identification of this sitter as Hortense Mancini arises. Born in Italy, but the niece of Louis XIV's Minister Jules Mazarin, Hortense was brought up at the court of the French 'Sun King'. When she was fourteen, the exiled King Charles II of England had asked for her hand in marriage, though her father rejected this, assuming that Charles would never be on the throne again.

It is the story that follows this proposal that brings up some issues around the identification of this sitter as Mancini. Around a year later, Hortense was married to Armand Charles de La Porte, 2nd Duke of La Meilleraye (1632-1713). This was not a happy marriage, and, as has been suggested by Annalisa Nicholson, the Duke was abusive towards his new wife.¹ Seeking refuge with her sister, Marie, who was also in an unhappy marriage, the two eventually planned to flee, with Hortense leaving Paris in 1668 in men's clothing.² She travelled to meet her sister in Italy. Later, Hortense would travel to England, where she became a mistress of Charles II, who was now King again.

If Hortense did leave her husband, then it brings up the question of why she would have been seen as significant enough to Louis XIV to have been painted as a part of his circle. However, in her memoirs, Hortense notes that the King did help her during her flight, giving her shelter. He encouraged her to return to her husband, and Madame Colbert, the wife of the King's minister, also pushed her to do so.³ The apparent kindness shown towards Hortense suggests that, even in her absence from the court, she was important to the King. This provides a strong enough reason to suggest that Bernard aimed to depict her here.

Furthermore, comparisons to other portraits of Hortense, including one by Ferdinand Voet (a teacher of Bernard), shows a large number of similarities in features. Hortense's iconography often includes the fashionable, curly hair that she sports in this miniature, and the same large, brown eyes.

Samuel Bernard had been one of the founders of the Academy of Painters and Sculptors in Paris in 1648, where he would remain a member for thirty-three years. He had a brief interlude in 1681 when he was exiled for his religious beliefs. After converting to Catholicism in 1685, he was allowed to re-enter the academy. The set of miniatures that this portrait originally came from, painted at the height of his success before his exile, suggest that Bernard had an intimate relationship with many members of the French court in this period. A member of Bernard's family who previously owned this set of miniatures, Elisabeth, Duchess of Clermont-Tonnerre, published a work on Bernard and his children in 1914.⁴

[1] See this interview with Nicololson, <https://www.thecambridgelanguagecollective.com/europe/annalisa-nicholson>, for more information.

[2] The date of Hortense's escape varies in different sources. This date comes from her biography, by Bryan Bevan (1987, p.32).

[3] This minister being Jean-Baptiste Colbert (1619-1683), the sitter of another of the miniatures from the same set by Bernard, available through the Limner Company.

[4] E. Clermont-Tonnerre, *Histoire de Samuel Bernard et de ses enfants*, 1914.

Exhibitions

Evreux, 1864;

Paris, Exposition Universelle, 1867.