THE LIMNER COMPANY



CORNELIUS JOHNSON (1593 - 1661)

Portrait of a Gentleman, wearing black doublet and wide, white lace collar; circa 1635

Circa: Circa 1635

Circa 1635

Oval, 5 cm (2 inches) high

Oil on copper

This portrait bears the hallmarks of the small oil on copper portraits by Cornelius Johnson, a successful portraitist in both large-scale and miniature format, who worked at the court of King Charles I. The careful attention to the sitter's lace collar and the play of light across the skin, with a sheen on the forehead and distinct pink flush on the apple of the cheeks, are all typical of the Johnson.[1]

While Johnson was born in London (to Flemish/German parents), his work owes a great deal to Continental style and sophistication. He trained mainly in the northern Netherlands, returning to London by early 1619, and no doubt benefited from other immigrant artists working in London at the time such as Daniel Mytens (c.1590-1647), Marcus Gheeraerts the Younger (1561/2-1636).[2] Gheeraerts was known to the Johnson family, being present at the baptism of Johnson's niece in 1612.[3] It has been suggested that Johnson may have trained with Gheeraerts after he returned from the Netherlands (likely 1618). [4]

Another interesting connection is Johnson's evident closeness to the great miniaturist of the previous generation, Isaac Oliver (c.1565-1617), an immigrant artist of French Huguenot parentage. Oliver had been made godfather to Johnson's nephew, Isaac, in 1616, and Oliver's widow was, like Johnson himself, a witness at the baptism of Johnson's younger nephew in 1619.[5]

Johnson worked at the court of King Charles I and was appointed the King's 'Picture Drawer' in 1632,

but his meticulous and quiet style was outshone by the Baroque swagger of Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640) and Anthony van Dyck, who arrived in London in the same year. Johnson's clientele became predominantly the lesser nobility and wealthy mercantile class, for whom he would often produce small, portable versions of his oil of canvas portraits. As deft in miniature as on large scale, he was one of the first artists working in miniature to occasionally sign his works.

Small-scale portraits painted in oil first appear in the sixteenth century. While they cannot technically be called miniatures (the term 'miniature' refers to the materials used rather than size of the portrait: traditionally watercolour on vellum), oil portraits functioned in the same way and were more robust than watercolours - being less susceptible to water and light damage, they were ideal for carrying on one's person. The format was particularly popular in Europe, specifically Dutch artists including Frans van Mieris (1635-81) and possibly Rembrandt.

When the English Civil War erupted in 1642, the miniature format proliferated as loved ones were separated. While other miniaturists, in particular Samuel Cooper (1607/08-1672), flourished during this period, Jonson's career slowed. He was soon persuaded by his wife to leave England for the Continent, and they sailed for Holland in 1643.

[1] A comparable example can be found in the JRKV collection, illustrated in Hofstetter, B., Portraitminiaturen: Hundert Bildnisse aus der Sammlung JRKV, 2018, pp.18-19

[2] https://www.npg.org.uk/whatson/display/2015/cornelius-johnson-charles-is-forgotten-painter

[3] Hearn,K., Cornelius Johnson (Paul Holberton), 2015, p.11

[4] This is the date given by George Vertue (1684–1756), who credits his source as Johnson's great-nephew, Anthony Russel (or Roussell) (c.1663-1743). See Hearn,K., Cornelius Johnson (Paul Holberton), 2015, p.10

[5] Ibid, p.12