# THE LIMNER COMPANY



**PIERRE SIGNAC (1623/24 - 1684)**

**Pair of portrait enamels, probably a self-portrait of the Artist and his wife**

Circa: Circa 1645

Circa 1645

Circular, 3.1 cm (1 $^{1}/_{4}$ inches) diameter

Enamel on gold, double sided

This pair of portraits, painted in enamel, appear to defy many conventions of both portraiture and painting technique of the 17th century. Delicately rendered on either side of a gold base, they present the sitters as though reflected in a convex mirror, with the faces slightly curved outwards towards the viewer – the convex illusion of the circular enamel disc mimicking such a self-reflection.[1]

Pierre Signac was born and educated in France. It is most likely that the present enamel was painted while the artist was still in Paris, fresh from studying at the studio of the renowned Toutin family, including his near contemporary, Henri Toutin (1614-83), son of Henri the Elder.

If this double portrait does represent Pierre Signac and his wife, the costume would date it to the year that he prepared to travel to the Swedish Court and was likely made as an example of his fine work to show his new patrons on his arrival in December 1646. The artist and his wife are presented here as wealthy merchant class - they wear respectable but not ostentatious clothing, much like Petitot in his self-portrait of which there are a few versions (see Fig. 1). It would seem that painting in enamel on gold was invented by the elder Henri Toutin in the 1630s.[2] If this is the case, then this pair, enamelled with outstanding technical skill (to paint an image on both the obverse and counter-enamel would have been an extraordinary challenge) are a successful experimental work by Signac. Toutin's influence can be seen here in the fine stipple, a technique also employed by his other famous pupil, Jean Petitot the Elder (1607-1691).

Fig. 1 Jean Petitot (1607-1691) self portrait

Signac continued to align himself with the Toutin dynasty after his move to Stockholm, where both Jean and Valentin found work at the court.[3] Signac's arrival increased both the supply and the demand for miniatures at court. Before his appearance at court, goldsmiths were ordered to colour and enamel medals. Now, Christina could present her painted enamel portrait to ambassadors and reward members of a court with a gift that was both personal and representative. Signac was the first person to arrive at the Swedish court with the capability of producing such work.

While there are examples of Signac's work in an official capacity, outside his royal commissions he produced many works which show a relaxed individuality. For example, The Finnish National Gallery holds a portrait on vellum attributed to Signac and described as a possible self-portrait.[4] With the costume datable to the early 1670s, this seems unlikely, but another portrait in the collection datable to the mid 1640s (Fig.2), and therefore potentially before his emigration to Sweden, demonstrates some of the awkward placement of the figure, the head filling the small space of the frame, much like the present enamel.

After an introduction to Queen Christina by Count Magnus Gabriel de la Gardie in 1646, Signac worked continuously as court painter. After the Queen's abdication in 1654 (a combination of her refusal to marry and her conversion to Catholicism in Lutheran Sweden meant her days as an acceptable monarch were already numbered), Signac served Karl Gustav until the King's death in 1660, whereafter he remained court miniature painter to the Dowager Queen Hedvig Eleonora.[5] Although Signac in many respects was a typical court enameller - likely running a workshop to keep up with demands from the Queen for portraits to be set as gifts - he was also asked on occasion to paint highly individualistic portraits of Hedvig. For example, in St. Annen Museum in Lübeck there is a portrait of the Queen as a widow, wearing a miniature of her husband. He was clearly trusted on many levels as an artist to court, also producing ambitious works such as the decoration of 'Queen Kristina's Clock' almost immediately on his arrival in Sweden (Fig. 3).

If accepted as a double portrait of the artist and his wife, the present work will be an important discovery in painted enamel portraits. A self-portrait of an artist is always a fascinating insight into the identity that an artist wishes to convey to the outside world. Here the combination of high quality materials and skilled technique used to present the artist and his wife as artisans is a unique contradiction in the years in which enamel painting was being established as a medium fit for royalty.

[1] This technique, a showcase for the artist's skills, can be seen most evidently in Parmigianino's small self-portrait oil, of circa 1524, 24,4 cm diam. (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna).

[2] See André Félibien, Des principes de l'architecture, de la sculpture, de la peinture, et des autres arts qui en dépendent avec un dictionnaire des termes propres à chacun des arts, Paris, Veuve & Jean-Baptiste Coignard, 1697 (third edition), p. 307-312. The author states that this technique was invented in 1632, whilst the artist was living between Chataudun (near Orléans) and Paris.

[3] For a closer look at the relationship between the Toutins and Signac see the article by Magnus Olausson, ‘Henri Toutin’s Portrait of Anne of Austria. A New Acquisition from the Infancy of Enamel Portraiture’, Art Bulletin of Nationalmuseum Volume 26:1, 2019.

[4] Finnish National Gallery Collection / Sinebrychoff Art Museum, Paul and Fanny Sinebrychoff's Art Collections.

[5] A portrait of Hedvig Eleonora, the Queen of Sweden, is in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London (P.33-1942).