THE LIMNER COMPANY



SAMUEL SHELLEY (1750/56 - 1808)

Portrait miniature of Eliza Louisa Masters, later Powney (1774-1818), wearing a simple white dress, her hair curled

Circa: Circa 1800

Circa 1800

Watercolour on ivory

Ivory licence number: 52H3EXJ2

Signed on the reverse ‘Sam: Shelley/ No6:George Street/ Hanover Sq’

Oval, 70mm (2 ¾ in) high.

This remarkably stripped-back portrait of a young woman, Eliza Louisa Masters, appears in its style to come from Samuel Shelley’s work in the late 18th century. It is likely that the engraving on the reverse of the frame, which names the sitter and provides her date of birth, was added at a late date. However, a visual comparison with a portrait of ‘Mrs Eliza Powney’ by Sir Martin Archer Shee [1] provides evidence that this miniature is in fact a depiction of the same woman. Very little else is known about Eliza or her future husband, George Powney. It can be inferred, however, that this portrait was painted before that taken by Shee. Eliza appears to be much younger, and her style, though extremely simple in both portraits, seems to be emphasising her youth and naivety.

The date of the miniature is indicated by two further clues- the address with which Shelley has signed it, and the style of clothing worn by Eliza. On the reverse of the miniature (now recorded with a small label, see verso), Shelley has written his address- ‘No. 6 George Street, Hanover Square’. As with many miniaturists of the period, signing with an address was important to gain exposure. Furthermore, these addresses would be recorded as part of the exhibitions where they sent their works. In the records of the Royal Academy Exhibitions, Shelley’s works from 1795 onwards are recorded to come from this particular address. He had first been admitted to the schools of the Royal Academy in 1774 and was a rather prolific artist. Such simple portraits as this example, however, are rare within his oeuvre. Many other examples of his work, including some previously sold by The Limner Company, depict women

wearing much more extravagant styles, largely influenced by the fashion of Marie Antoinette and her French Court.

Here, however, Eliza only wears a white dress. Her hair has been curled, but is not adorned with accessories, as would have been the fashion only a decade earlier. She also wears no jewellery, emphasising the simplicity of her outfit. All this is typical of the early years of the nineteenth century- the revolution in France was one of the reasons for a turn towards a simpler and more neoclassically-influenced style. The result is a charming portrait, which emphasises Eliza's natural beauty.

[1] The whereabouts of this painting is presently unknown, and a visual comparison has only been possible through an advert for the printmaker H. Goffey. He has used his copy of the work by Shee as a specimen.