

THE LIMNER COMPANY



FRENCH SCHOOL (18th century)

Portrait miniature of a Lady in a Maroon dress, with lace sleeves and decorative bows, writing a love letter (which reads 'mon cher couer/ton absence...')

Circa: circa 1758

circa 1758

Watercolour on ivory (licence 98TLNUXL)

5 x 7.3 cm (2 x 2 ⁷/₈ inches)

Gilt metal frame with beaded edge

Love letters played an important role in French Society throughout the late eighteenth century. In 2023, an academic discovered a series of letters that English soldiers had confiscated from French Soldiers fighting in the Seven Years' War. Most of these were written by wives of these soldiers, waiting for them at home in France. Given the apparent date of this miniature, indicated by the style of the woman's dress and lace sleeves, it is possible that her love, who has departed from her, had gone to fight in this same war.

She is clearly a prolific writer, and an already sealed letter is propped upon one of the writing implements on the table. Her hair is worn in the popular 'tête de mouton' hairstyle, which refers to the close curls of a sheep's coat. Many of the features of this unknown woman's dress are reminiscent of the fashionable ladies painted by Jean Marc Nattier (1685-1766), including the dramatic bows and sleeves, both of which match the colours of the delicate flowers placed in her hair. The lace she wears is styled in a triple flounce, providing volume and demonstrating her knowledge of the trends of the time. Madame de Pompadour, an icon of fashion and Louis XV's maîtresse en titre, was known for her love of this material, which would be used in the same context as this woman's dress, but also on collars, necklaces, and petticoats.

The Seven Years' War took place when Marie Antoinette was a young girl, and saw her native Austria allied with France. Conflict had originally broken out in North America between French and British colonists, and soon spread to India and Europe. The Franco-Austrian alliance had emerged as a result of Britain and Prussia becoming allies; this was a sudden change in loyalty following centuries of the French and Austrians being enemies. In 1770, Marie married Louis XVI, marking another important step forward in Franco-Prussian relations.