THE LIMNER COMPANY



FRANZ XAVER FAHRLÄNDER (1793 - 1850)

Portrait miniature of a Gentleman, wearing a black jacket, white shirt and wide collar, a loosely tied black cravat, holding a telescope, stood in front of Mount Vesuvius

Circa: 1835

1835

Watercolour on ivory (licence MZ1VFBZA)

Rectanfular, 90 x 78 mm (3 $^{1}/_{2}$ x 3 $^{1}/_{8}$ in)

Signed and dated ‘Fahrländer 1835’

Gilt-metal frame

There are many characteristics of the present sitter that indicate he was an interesting character. He stands in front of Mount Vesuvius, and his collar and necktie echo the style often donned by sailors in the period during which the miniature was painted. However, he is not a member of the Navy; if this were the case, he would have been depicted wearing his uniform. There are also visual similarities with the fashions worn by Lord Byron (1788-1824) and his followers, especially in the wide, loose collar that the sitter wears.

Mount Vesuvius erupted in the summer of 1834 and continued to be active until 1839, when it erupted again. Dated 1835, this portrait must have been captured during the Strombolian Eruptions (intermittent bursts and explosions) that continued for the next four years. In the gentleman’s right hand is a handheld telescope, which would have been used to observe the volcano. Grand tourists of the period who were more courageous may have climbed the mountain to see it from a closer angle, even during periods of eruption, which only made the journey more exhilarating. In the mid-1830s, half of the journey would have been done on donkeys, followed by an hour of walking and then an ascent to the very summit[1]. This was not an easy journey, and an account by Catherine-Valérie Boissier from 1834 records her ‘torrent of suffering’ as she descended the mountain, when she had to be saved by her guide[2].

In 1814, Fahrländer had become a student at the Fine Arts Academy of Vienna, and he went on to exhibit there in 1822 and 1824. Little else is known about his life. This work comes from later in his career, in the 1830s. The maturity of the artist's skill is particularly evident, especially in the impressive curly textures used in the sitter's hair, and in the attention paid to the detail of the ships in the background of the composition.

[1]A.Chandler, 'The Long History of Tourism at Pompeii and Mount Vesuvius', History is Now Magazine, online, accessed 23 July 2025, at https://www.historyisnowmagazine.com/blog/2025/3/15/the-long-history-of-tourism-at-pompeii-and-mount-vesuvius.

[2] J. Uglow, 'The Volcano Lovers', The New York review, online, accessed 18 April 2024 at https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2024/04/18/the-volcano-lovers-mount-vesuvius/.