

THE LIMNER COMPANY



RICHARD COSWAY (1742 - 1821)

Portrait miniature of John Harrison (1755-1818)

Circa: circa 1790

circa 1790

Watercolour on ivory (licence QRBRY4P2)

Oval, 80mm (3 1/8in) high

Gold frame, with blue and white enamel border and lock of hair held with gold wire on opalescent glass

John Harrison's father, also John, had been a director of the East India Company and of the Bank of England. It is clear that his profession benefited the rest of his family, as the John Harrison painted here was to become the president of the Canton establishment of the East India Company. The Company had retained a post in Canton (today Guangzhou), near Hong Kong, since 1715. It was from here that they were able to export large quantities of Chinese Tea, which had become more and more popular amongst British Citizens throughout the eighteenth century. Trade had been limited to the Cantonese ports for Western European merchants, where other goods from China, such as porcelain and furniture, were also becoming increasingly favoured for export.

Around the time that this portrait was painted, the market was shifting in Canton, where for a long time the East India Company had seen a trade deficit. Chinese consumers were not particularly interested in anything that they had to offer. This soon changed when the idea to export opium, grown in the British colonies in India, to China emerged. The East India Company was able to take hold of an open and growing market for the highly addictive substance. As the nineteenth century unfolded, this trade would lead to the outbreak of the Opium Wars.

Little is known about John's involvement with this trade, aside from the fact that he was president of the company. In 1807, he became High Sheriff of Kent- given this date it can be assumed this was a role he took up upon his return from Canton. In Britain, he lived at Denne Hill, in Kent. He died without issue in

1818. Despite his connections to the East India Company, through which he would have had access to lavish fabrics, his outfit is remarkably plain, emphasising instead his piercing blue eyes, and facial features.

The bright blue used in the background of this miniature is typical of Cosway's later work. By the time this portrait was taken, Cosway had become well established as an artist and lived on Pall Mall, with the Gainsboroughs as their neighbours. Here, he and Maria hosted extravagant parties and soirees, attended by important figures of Georgian society. It is likely that many of his commissions from this period came from events like these, and Cosway's fame not only as an artist, but also as a fellow important member of society.