

THE LIMNER COMPANY



HARRIET BECKFORD (1779 - 1853)

Portrait miniature of William Horace Beckford, later 3rd Baron Rivers (1777-1831)

Circa: 1802

Watercolour on ivory (licence 1RVZQBQS)

Inscribed on label on reverse '34/ William Horace Beckford/ Afterwards 3rd Lord Rivers/ by Harriet Beckford =1802='

Oval, 8.7 cm (3 ⅝ in.) high

The young William Horace Beckford (known as Horace Beckford) was painted here by his younger sister, Harriet. In 1802, William was 23, much older than he appears in this portrait. In fact, this likeness was not taken from life and was painted by Harriet after a drawing done by Richard Cosway in 1790.

This drawing, now in the Morgan Library and Museum, depicts the young boy full-length, with large ostrich plumes coming from his hat and a cane in his right hand, the other resting on a column. Beckford has painted him in the same position, but, due to the miniature's size constraints, has copied only the top half of her brother.

Harriet Beckford has a small but distinguished *oeuvre*, which Schidlof (1964) states should be better known. A portrait of Emma Hamilton by Harriet can be found in the Royal Museums, Greenwich[1], and Schidlof reproduces another of her works in his 1964 reference work[2]. It was seen as 'proper' for

female miniature painters (and artists, in general) to copy works rather than create original compositions. Copying the work of masters was a common practice for developing one's style, and may have been encouraged during Harriet's time at the Academy of Fine Arts, Florence[3]. As a miniature painter, Harriet chose to imitate the work of one of the greatest miniature painters of her day.

The original drawing is likely to have been Harriet's family's collection, which she would have had constant access to, given she was not married until five years after this miniature was painted. Her marriage did not stop her art, and the Schidlof reproduction comes from two years after her wedding. In the following years, Harriet became friendly with William Henry Fox Talbot (1800-1877), and there are letters recorded between the two. Talbot was a pioneer of photography in Britain, though few of their letters discuss art. One, written in December 1832[4], may reference a book of prints by Guercino given to Harriet by Fox Talbot, which may well have been used for copies.

This miniature was painted in the year that Horace adopted the title *3rd Lord Pitt Rivers*. He was the only son of Peter Beckford (c.1740-c.1809) and Hon. Louisa Pitt (1755-1791), the daughter of the 1st Baron Rivers. His title had emerged from the third creation. Aside from having this title, Horace did not live a particularly noble life. In 1808, he married Frances Rigby, and three years later, he would inherit his father's estates. By this time, however, Horace had become a renowned gambler. His addiction was so well-known that, in 1828, the 2nd Baron Rivers (his maternal uncle) refused to bequeath him his estate in entirety and instead left him an income of £4,000 a year. The rest of the estate was entrusted to Horace's eldest son, George. Tragically, Horace was found drowned in the Serpentine in 1831, having relapsed into his addiction. In one of her letters to Fox-Talbot, Harriet discusses her brother's death as a 'sad and awful event...' [5]

Here, Horace is pictured before gambling took control of his life. He looks young, fashionable, and somewhat dramatic with the large ostrich feathers atop his hat. These were popular accessories in the late eighteenth century, especially amongst women, though in the years following the creation of this portrait, they would become synonymous with the plumes worn by revolutionary men and women.

Feathers like these have a long tradition in military menswear, such as in the hats worn by the Landesknechts of 16th-century Northern Europe. A similar outfit is worn by Richard Cosway in a self-portrait at the British Museum (1857,0606.29).

[1] HARRIET BECKFORD, Emma, Lady Hamilton, watercolour on ivory, circular, 8.2cm diameter, National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London. Caird Fund, MNT0127.

[2] L. R. Schidlof, *The Miniature in Europe*, Graz, 1964, vol. 3, fig. 77, pl. 43.

[3] Where she is recorded as a member in 1797.

[4] Seen on *The Correspondence of William Henry Fox Talbot* (online), 12 Dec 1832, SEYMER Harriet Ker, née Beckford to TALBOT William Henry Fox (Doc. No.: 465 Collection: British Library, London, Manuscripts - Fox Talbot Collection).

[5] Seen on *The Correspondence of William Henry Fox Talbot* (online), 01 Feb 1831, SEYMER Harriet Ker, née Beckford to TALBOT William Henry Fox, (Doc. No.: 2137, Collection: British Library, London, Manuscripts - Fox Talbot Collection).