THE LIMNER COMPANY



ENGLISH SCHOOL

A portrait miniature ‘lovers eye’ of the hazel eye of Ellen Jane (d.1821)

Circa: 1821

1821

10mm (5/8 in) diam.

Watercolour on ivory (licence number YPKSLTG7)

When George, Prince of Wales, sent Maria Fitzherbert his eye miniature (he wrote ‘I send you a Parcel. . . and I send you at the same time an Eye, if you have not totally forgotten the whole countenance. I think the likeness will strike you’, he began a fad for eye miniatures which quickly caught on in his circle of friends. Eyes became the most intimate type of miniature – their identity known only to the wearer – set into brooches and rings as with this example here. As mourning jewellery, eyes had a particular significance – not only due to their intimate nature but also to the fact that it might have been more painful to endure the sight of the whole face of the person now lost. The eye miniature took that secretive, intimate, watchful and interactive element of portrait miniatures to a new level.

Eye miniatures were rarely discussed in contemporary literature, adding further to their mystery. Horace Walpole suggested that the craze had originally come from France, writing a letter on 27 October 1785 to the Countess of Ossory stating:

‘When human folly, or rather French folly, can go so far, it would be trifling to instance a much fainter silliness; but you know Madam, that the fashion now, is it not, to have portraits but of an eye? They say ‘Lord don’t you know it?’ A Frenchman is come over to paint eyes here.’

Charles Dickens turns the erotic and secretive element of the eye miniature on its head in a subversive text which assumes that his readers would have understood the original purpose of eye miniatures. In Dombey and Son (1848) Dickens introduces us to Miss Tox, an ageing spinster: 'when full-dressed, she wore round her neck the barrenest of lockets, representing a fishy old eye, with no approach to speculation in it.' On Miss Tox, the eye miniature perhaps presented to her when she had hopes of romance leading to marriage becomes an object of disgust, far removed from her youth.

Here, the subject of the eye was an ‘Ellen Jane’ – possibly unmarried when she died at the age of twenty as recorded on the reverse of the gold ring. Dated to 1821, the eye miniature was clearly still in fashion in the early 19th century. The Royal Collection Trust holds the miniature of the ‘Eye of Princess Charlotte (1796-1817)’, likely worn after her unexpected death in childbirth in 1817 at the age of twenty-one. Now set into a bracelet, this eye miniature was thought to have been worn by Queen Victoria as a brooch.