THE LIMNER COMPANY



JOHN SMART (1741 - 1811)

Portrait miniature of a Gentleman, 'possibly' George Phillips Towry (1729-1817), wearing a blue coat with scarlet collar and gold lacing, a white shirt, the collar turned over a white stock, and a lace jabot, his hair worn 'en queue'

Circa: 1767

1767

Watercolour on ivory (licence JENBLLJG)

Oval, 34mm (1 ⅜ in) high

Signed and dated, ‘JS / 1767’

Gold bracelet clasp frame, the reverse with an illegible engraved script

At one stage in its recent history, the sitter of this miniature was identified as ‘The Hon. Thomas Hervey’, presumably The Hon. Thomas Hervey MP (1699-1775), son of the 1st Earl of Bristol. No evidence can be found however to support this claim and the two recorded portraits of Hervey by John Smart[1] are described as wearing red coats with blue facings – the exact opposite to the current sitter.[2]

An auction record from the early twentieth century tentatively suggests that the sitter could be Captain George Henry ‘Toury’ (Towry) of the Royal Navy (1767–1809), although this does not hold with the date given by the artist (underneath his signature on the lower right of the obverse) of 1767. The sitter could more reasonably be identified as George Henry’s father, George Phillips Towry (1729-1817), although once again this does not fit perfectly with the record, as Daphne Foskett’s index of Smart’s sitters notes a ‘Capt. G. N. Towry, R.N.’ (Royal Navy).[3] A member of the family with the initial ‘G. N.’ in 1767 cannot be found at present.

If the current sitter is of the Towry family, he belonged to an esteemed naval dynasty. The most likely candidate, George Phillips (b. 1729), had an uneventful early career in the Navy before being

commissioned lieutenant in February 1757. On inheriting a family estate *circa* 1762, he enjoyed a sojourn from the navy for over a decade, during which he won £20,000 in a lottery.[4]

George was married on 7th June 1766, the year prior to the current portrait; his bride was the wealthy Elizabeth More 'of Newman Street, London'.[5] The miniature is mounted in a gold bracelet-clasp frame and was intended to be worn by a loved one - an ideal gift for a newlywed. There is the trace of an inscription on the reverse of the frame, but this is now so abraded - likely through wear - that it is tantalisingly indecipherable.

The date of the miniature to Towry's period ashore may explain the ambiguity of his attire. While he could be wearing uniform (although not Royal Navy uniform), it is more likely that he was depicted in civilian dress inspired by military uniform.

Towry returned to the Navy as a Victualling Commissioner in 1784 and by the end of 1803 he was Deputy Chairman of the Victualling Board. It was that Board's responsibility to ensure 'His Majesty's Ships and Vessels', both at home and abroad and soldiers abroad, were provided with food and beverages. It was a vast logistical challenge, which, contrary to popular perception, recent research has suggested was achieved with impressive efficiency. In fact, Royal Navy sailors were 'eating well compared with many people ashore'.[6]

Towry would be typical of the wealthy professional class and gentry that sat to John Smart. By the date of this miniature, the young Smart had established his own London studio and his career was full of promise. He quickly became a highly sought-after miniaturist, never more so than when he journeyed to India, where he painted many military portraits of the British stationed there.

We are grateful to Stephen Wood for his assistance with cataloguing this miniature.

[1] Foskett, D., *John Smart: The Man and His Miniatures*, 1964 (Cory, Adams & Mackay), p.68

[2] Hervey Lane sale. One of these portraits (the earlier example dated 1764) is in the National Trust collection at Ickworth, Surrey (NT 851880).

[3] Foskett, p.75

[4] Catalogue entry for Royal Museums Greenwich BHC3058.

[5] 'London Evening Post', 7 June 1766 – quoted in catalogue entry for Royal Museums Greenwich BHC3058.

[6] 'Sustaining the Empire: War, the Navy and the Contractor State', University of Greenwich research project, 2006-2009 - https://www.rmg.co.uk/sites/default/files/Sustaining_the_Empire_project.pdf