

THE LIMNER COMPANY



CONTINENTAL SCHOOL, circa 1610s

Portrait of a Young Boy, wearing lilac-coloured doublet, slashed and embroidered with gold

Circa: circa 1610s

circa 1610s

Oil on copper heightened with gold

Oval, 63mm (2½ in) high

Associated gilded metal frame

The delicate technique used to produce this painting of a young boy – who cannot be more than eight years old – and the use of real gold paint suggests that the artist was trained as a miniature painter and not as an easel artist. This is further evidenced by the gold border which runs around the edge of the portrait – a feature used by limners or early miniature painters to refer back to the borders of portraits in manuscript illuminations. Although we cannot be certain of the artist – or even the origin of the artist – for this work, one suggestion would be Jacob van der Doort (c.1580-1629), who was skilled in both oil and watercolour painting and brother of Abraham Keeper of Charles I's art collections (and as such, the first Surveyor of the King's Pictures). If the artist is Jacob van der Doort, the child may be Christian, Prince-Elect of Denmark (1603-1647) as a child.

Christian was born at Copenhagen Castle to King Christian IV (1577–1648) and Queen Anne Catherine (1575–1612) of Denmark and Norway. His father outlived him by one year and he never became king. Datable to 1610, this portrait may mark him as hailed as heir apparent by the Councils and Representatives of the Estates.

The expensive doublet worn by this child, trimmed with gold embroidery and slashed suggests that he is likely of noble status. Few children were painted in the early seventeenth century – still a time when the

majority never reaching adulthood – but many artists, including Anthony van Dyck were beginning to explore the portrayal of children.[1]

The child here is likely older than six, as in the seventeenth century, when a boy reached the age this age, it was usual for him to be ‘breeched’, i.e. he graduated from wearing skirts to breeches (trousers), an event which was a proud and celebrated family occasion. The commission from the artist was perhaps made to note that the boy is leaving childhood behind – his serious expression shows no hint of distraction from childish games. It may also have been easier for the artist to paint a child in small – it would have been no easy task to keep a child still and entertained for the duration of a portrait sitting.[2]

The portrait miniature was also the perfect medium for images of children in that it captured, perhaps more than any other form of portrayal, the fleeting nature of childhood. The chief miniaturists (or limners) working in England while this portrait was painted were Nicholas Hilliard (c. 1547-1619) and Isaac Oliver (c.1565-1617). Both miniaturists painted Henry, Prince of Wales as a child – works which became ever more precious were after the prince’s unexpected early death at the age of eighteen in 1612.

[1] Most famously, perhaps, in the Three Eldest Children of Charles I, 1635, versions in Galleria Sabauda, Turin and The Royal Collection Trust.

[2] Lucas Cranach the Elder (1472-1533) took the advice of Emperor Charles V’s tutor and hung a polished weapon on the wall to distract him during his portrait sitting at the age of eight.