

THE LIMNER COMPANY



CHARLES SHIRREFF (b.c. 1750 -)

Portrait of a Gentleman, possibly in a captain's uniform, with brass buttons

Circa: Circa 1780s

Watercolour on ivory

Gilt metal frame, the reverse decorated with hairwork, seed pearls, and the monogram FN

Oval, 52 mm (2 in) high.

The gentleman in this portrait has previously been described as an officer, most likely because of his blue coat and its buttons, which appear to have the number '2' on them. However, these features do not necessarily mean that he was a naval officer, and it has not been possible to find a visual match with any known naval uniform from the period in which this miniature was painted. It has been suggested by uniform experts that the gentleman could be wearing an undress coat, worn by captains of more than three years' seniority; however, this cannot be said with certainty.

As for the buttons on his coat, it is possible that the '2' is in fact an anchor wrapped in a cable, also known as a 'fouled anchor'. This was an image used on the buttons of Royal Naval Officers' uniforms at the time this miniature was painted. It is also possible that this gentleman held no role in the navy and instead chose to wear a blue coat to have his portrait taken by Shirreff.

Born in Scotland, Charles Shirreff grew up deaf and non-verbal. When he was less than twenty years old, he enrolled at the R.A. schools, marking the beginning of his successful career in miniature painting. Only a few years before this miniature is believed to have been painted, Shirreff petitioned the East India Company for his passage to India, though this journey never took place, despite his being accepted. In this petition, the artist noted his hearing and speaking difficulties, and his ability to speak in sign, implying that this never stopped him from communicating and working effectively. In fact, during his eventual visit to India, between 1795 and 1809, he appears to have developed a 'Finger Alphabet', which he announced in 1807 was to be sent to subscribers.

Foskett calls his portraits 'unflattering', but 'neatly executed'. That is certainly the case here. The unknown gentleman has been depicted in a realistic manner, with no attempt to conceal features like his under eye bags, which have been added in with meticulous detail. This incredible attention to the more minor features on the sitters face, including a blotch on his forehead which may well have been added deliberately, make this a charming, though mysterious, record of an unknown sitter.

We are grateful to Stephen Wood for his advice on the uniform of this sitter.