THE LIMNER COMPANY



Sir Robert Peake (c.1605 - 1667)

King Charles II (1630-1685), wearing gilt-studded armour and white lace jabot

Circa: circa 1660

circa 1660

Watercolour on vellum

Oval, 60mm (2 3/8in) high

signed in gold with initials ‘RP’ and dated ‘166[...]’

Later silver frame with spiral cresting

This portrait of King Charles II, signed with the initials ‘RP’ and dated ‘166[...]’ would appear to be the only extant work by the artist, print-seller and royalist soldier Sir Robert Peake. His grandfather, Robert Peake (1551-1619), became Serjeant-Painter jointly with John de Critz and died in the same year as Nicholas Hilliard. Robert’s son, William Peake (c.1580-1639), was also an artist, but without the fame (and some would say, skill) of his father.[1] He was also a print-seller who both printed and published and sold the work of other engravers, such as those by Simon de Passe, from his premises at Holborn Conduit ‘next to the Sunne Tauerne’ at the bottom of Snow Hill. William’s son, called Robert after his celebrated grandfather, inherited both the print business and aspirations as an artist, as seen in the present work.[2]

Both Sir Robert and his father William nurtured artists whose talent, arguably, was greater than that of their master’s. William Peake, like his father a freeman of the Goldsmiths’ Company, took in the painter William Dobson (1611-1646) as his apprentice. The product of Dobson’s short life was a body of superb portraits, painted somewhat in the shadow of the great Sir Anthony van Dyck. Sir Robert took on the brilliant engraver William Faithorne, the elder (c.1620-1691) as his apprentice after his father’s early death in 1639.

The Peake family had a longstanding association with the crown and when Charles I raised his standard at Nottingham in 1642, Robert was obliged to enrol in his army, taking with his as ensign his apprentice Faithorne. Both Peake and Faithorne were captured at Basing House during the siege of 1645 (where Peake had been knighted by Charles I on the 27 March 1645) and imprisoned. Faithorne was, however, able to work during his internment, producing an engraving of the Duke of Buckingham before moving to France circa 1648. Peake was imprisoned at Winchester House and then in Aldersgate and finally exiled after refusing to take an oath of loyalty to Cromwell.

It is not known where Peake was in exile, or when he returned to England. The present work dates to the 1660s, although the final digit is obscured, and may have been painted in joyous recognition that the monarchy he had supported so unwaveringly was now restored. The portrait of Charles II relates, perhaps unsurprisingly, most closely to an undated engraving by Faithorne[3], showing the future king in armour, the Lesser George suspended from a chain at his neck. In his portrait, Peake has omitted any royal insignia – neither the Lesser George nor the Garter sash are shown. The initials 'RP' are inscribed in gold paint and surrounded by four further dots of paint, much in the same way that father and son Isaac and Peter Oliver signed their works. This self-styled connection to the two great masters of the art of miniature painting or 'limning' suggests that Peake was at least paying homage to the progenitors of the art form. By this date, the main protagonists in limning were John Hoskins (c.1590-1665) and his apprentice Samuel Cooper (1607/8-1672), both of whom used the looser brushwork seen here in Peake's attempt.

This rare, perhaps even unique, portrait by Sir Robert Peake is a fascinating work, embodying the strong Royalist leanings of the artist, as well as the close relationship between portrait painting and engraving during the 17th century. Peake was in an almost matchless position to see the great portraits of the Interregnum and Restoration, through his family connections and through his own print-selling business. After the Restoration, Peake was appointed vice-president and leader of the Honourable Artillery Company by James, Duke of York. He died shortly afterwards in 1667 and was buried in St. Sepulchre's Church, London. As testimony to his noted life, a broadside 'Panegyrick' was published shortly after his death.

[1] There is one painting agreed to be by William Peake - Portrait of a Boy of the Howard Family with a Bow (Ranger's House, Blackheath), but his opus of works remains unclear.

[2] In a letter to Samuel Pepys written in 1690, John Evelyn remembered that Peake was the dealer 'who had the most choice' of prints in London (H. C. Levis, Extracts from the Diaries and Correspondence of John Evelyn and Samuel Pepys Relating to Engraving, 1915, 84).

[3] See NPG D22695 for one example; the engraving dates variously from the 1650s-1660s