THE LIMNER COMPANY



ISMAEL 'ISRAEL' MENGS (1688 - 1764)

A portrait miniature of the head of an Elderly Bearded Man

Circa: 1711

1711

Watercolour and bodycolour on vellum

73 x 51 mm (2.8 x 2 inches)

Signed and dated

This portrait of an elderly man – likely a type of image known as a ‘tronie’ – would appear to be one of only four miniatures on vellum by the Saxon Court artist Ismael Mengs. Writing in his memoirs, Ismael’s son notes that his father never ‘finished more than four [miniatures], three of the which are in my possession’.[1] The present work seems to be a pendant to Ismael’s self-portrait (Fig.1) (current whereabouts unknown), completed shortly after his training in Copenhagen. It may have been painted while he was living in Lübeck, or Hamburg – but was likely used as an introduction to his skills ahead of his move to the court of Mecklenburg in 1713 (where the future Queen Charlotte, wife of George III, would be born in 1744). The emergence of this rare work by Ismael Mengs comes at a time when he and his son’s work is undergoing review – with a comprehensive, monographic exhibition at the Prado in Madrid (2025-26).

Although highly accomplished, the childish face of the self-portrait painted in the same year reminds us that the artist had barely begun his career. Leo Schidlof’s description of this miniature (he had sight of the work in the 20th century) as having ‘a force of expression quite out of the ordinary’, may equally have applied to the small tronie here. Rather than a standard portrait miniature of the early 18th century, this image has all the potency and presence of an old master oil painting. The image delivers an immediate directness. As Andrea Lutz observes of tronies ‘Their closeness to reality and immediacy are of almost timeless validity, which makes the virtuously painted faces seem appealing and topical even today.’[2]

Mengs' early itinerant life reflects that he was struggling to find a permanent court position at the time the present work was painted. His travels took him to Dresden and Leipzig and he visited Italy in pursuit of inspiration and connections (a portrait of Prince Eugenio of Savoia-Carignano, also on vellum, can be found in the Palazzo Madama, Turin.) His varied skills – miniaturist, enameller and oil painter – eventually secured him a court appointment in Dresden. Around 1714 he painted another self-portrait on parchment showing himself visibly older and more sophisticated in the typical dress of a Polish nobleman (Fig. 2, complete with heron feathers in his hat).[3]

Augustus II, the Strong (1670-1733) (he would show his strength by bending horseshoes and tossing foxes), Elector of Saxony and King of Poland, was the first major patron for Ismael and for him he made portraits in enamel.[4] Ismael's son, Anton Raphael Mengs (1728-1779), followed his father with a court appointment to Augustus III at the tender age of seventeen. Raphael's father proved a strict master, teaching and travelling with his son who eventually surpassed him as an artist. Ismael's ambitions for his children were not confined to his son – his eldest daughter Therese Maron was also a painter, as was his youngest daughter Julia. Recognising the early genius of Raphael, Augustus III bought all his available pastels from his father Ismael Mengs and had them transferred to the Cabinet of Rosalba in the Royal Picture Gallery (Venetian artist Rosalba Carriera (1675-1757) being a favourite artist of the ruler).

At the Dresden court, the name Mengs finally became recognised as culturally significant – even if Ismael's output had been on the meagre side, his children took up the artistic baton with aplomb. In the two volumes of his 'Umständliche Beschreibung Dresdens mit allen seinen inneren und äußeren Merkwürdigkeiten historisch und architektonisch' (Comprehensive description of Dresden with all its internal and external historical and architectural features)2 published in 1781 and 1783, local historian Johann Christian Hasche offers a description of the wonders and history of the Saxon electoral city. He wrote 'Also here [in the pastel cabinet] is a table with three long drawers, which holds over 100 quite excellent miniature paintings by the master hand of the two Mengses and Theresa Mengs, mostly in tortoise shell or set in gold. On it lies quite a stock of pictures in enamel. Among the former, Cupid who sharpened his arrows is a Mengs: more beautiful his ideal can be imagined; then Ismael Mengs' Magdalena and Theresa Mengs' beautiful night: all quite enchanting pieces. Who does not already see from this dry list that our gallery is one of the most beautiful in Europe!'.[5]

Ismael was a fascinating character – he was a rebel, who lived outside societal norms. The artist's religion is still a matter of debate – long thought to have been born into a Jewish family, he became a Lutheran around 1710. His longstanding affair with his housekeeper, Christiana Charlotta Bornmannin (1703-1731), produced four children, but the couple did not marry until near the end of her life in 1729. This unconventional relationship caused many issues, including the status of these illegitimate children.[6] Ismael was, it seems, a tyrannical father and teacher – his son's memoirs recalling 'a man more severe and rigid to his children never was known.'[7] Ismael's interests extended to chemistry and he worked developing colours for the Meissen porcelain factory. In 1764, perhaps in recognition of the successful training he had given his children, he was made an honorary professor at the newly established Academy of Fine Arts in Dresden, dying just six weeks after this prestigious appointment.

Fig. 1

Ismael Mengs, Self-portrait, watercolour and bodycolour on vellum, signed and dated 1711 (now lost), reproduced from black and white photograph in Schidlof, 'The Miniature in Europe', 1964, pl. 812.

Fig. 2

Ismael Mengs, self-portrait in Polish Costume, circa 1714

Watercolour on parchment

Dimensions 9.3 x 7.4 cm

[1] Anton Raphael Mengs (1728-1779), 'The works of Anthony Raphael Mengs, first painter to His Catholic Majesty Charles III.' Azara, José Nicolás de, Marqués de Nibbiano, 1730 or 31-1804; Waddilove, Robert Darley, 1736-1828, p. 17.

[2] Lutz on the exhibition 'Portrait Tales – Portrait and Tronie in Dutch Art'. Exhibition: 11 March - 5 November 2023, Kunst Museum Winterthur, Switzerland.

[3] Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Dresden, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister

[4] One enamel version exists in the Dresden, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister Dresden, and another is noted in the Louvre, Paris by Schidlof.

[5] "Auch steht hier [im Pastellkabinett] ein Tisch mit drei langen Schubkasten, der über 100 ganz vortreffliche Miniaturbilder von der Meisterhand der beyden Mengse, und der Theresa Mengs, meist in Schildkrotrahm oder in Gold gefaßt, aufbewahrt. Auf ihm liegt ein ziemlicher Vorrath von Bildern in Email. Unter erstern ist Amor welcher seine Pfeile schärfte ein Mengs: schöner läßt sich sein Ideal denken; dann Ismael Mengs Magdalena und Therea Mengs schöne Nacht: alles ganz bezaubernde Stücke. Wer sieht nicht schon aus diesem trocknen Verzeichnisse, daß unsere Gallerie eine der schönsten in Europa sey!" (Johann Christian Hasche, Umständliche Beschreibung Dresdens mit allen seinen inneren und äußeren Merkwürdigkeiten historisch und architektonisch, Vol. 2 (Leipzig: Schwickertscher Verlag, 1783), 90-91.

[6] Whenever Christiana was pregnant, her and Ismael rented a house in Ústí nad Labem, Mírové Square, where they stayed until his wife gave birth. When the time came, Ismael Mengs visited the mayor, gave him a gift for the city's needs, and requesting that he became the godfather of his children. He confirmed that they were born within marriage and were properly baptized in the Roman Catholic faith at the church in Ústí nad Labem.

[7] Mengs (1728-1779), op. cit., p. 6.