

# THE LIMNER COMPANY



**ARCHIBALD SKIRVING (1749 - 1819)**

**Portrait miniature of an unknown Lady, wearing a white dress with pink ribbon, her hair powdered white and worn with a pale pink ribbon, holding sheet music**

Circa: circa 1790s

circa 1790s

*Watercolour on ivory (licence N42YMHP1)*

Oval, 80mm (3 1/8in) high

Gilt metal frame with opalescent glass reverse, decorated with hairwork and the monogram 'JWS' (?)

Named 'Raeburn's Rival' by Stephen Lloyd in his 1999 exhibition based on the works of Archibald Skirving, this Scottish-born artist led a life much in parallel to that of his native contemporary. His work and biography have been the subject of much writing and research, including the 1999 exhibition[1], a 1991 dissertation by Tanja Sundström[2], and an earlier article by Basil Skinner[3]. Despite this, and his incredible skill in painting both in pastel and miniature, he is not as widely recognised as some of his contemporaries.

Skirving was born to Adam Skirving (1719-1803) and his first wife, Jean Ainslie (b.c. 1722). Adam was a musician and farmer, and is believed to have written the lyrics for the Jacobite folk song 'Hey, Johnnie Cope, are we walking yet?'. His artistic career began in Edinburgh around 1770. By the late 1780s, he had made the decision to travel to Italy, where he spent most of his time in Rome. Here, he painted miniatures, oil, and pastels of grand tourists. In 1794, during his return to Scotland, Skirving was arrested and imprisoned, suspected of espionage. It is probable that this accusation came from his carrying artists' materials, which could have been used to record information. Though he was released after a few months, the time Skirving spent in prison had an irreversible impact on him, and worsened the health of his eyes, meaning he now had 'forked' vision.

The artist's eye condition did not prevent him from continuing his career upon his return to Britain. For the rest of his life, he spent time in both Edinburgh and London, completing commissions, though it should be noted that fewer of these were for portrait miniatures than for pastels and oil paintings.

It is not known who the woman in this portrait is, though the subject and composition are particularly intriguing. During the 1780s, Skirving painted numerous portraits of women holding objects, as seen in this miniature. A similar portrait can be found in the Victoria and Albert Museum[4], and shows a lady holding what appears to be a piece of paper. The present work, however, is rather more adventurous in its composition and seems to have a greater resemblance to Skirving's work of the 1790s. It would be tempting to suggest that the woman in the portrait was a family member, given the artist's father's connection to music. Another suggestion for the identification is Sophia Giustina Dussek, née Corrie (1775-c.1831), a Scottish singer, Pianist, Harpist, and Composer. Sophia was born to Italian composer Domenico Corri (1746-1825) and grew up in Edinburgh before moving to London in 1788. Her husband, whom she married in 1792, Jan Ladislav Dussek (1760-1812) was also a famous composer from Bohemia (now Czech Republic). According to legend, he is the first concert pianist to rotate the piano sideways, so he was viewed in profile while he played. A known portrait of Sophia does bear some resemblance to the woman painted by Skirving here, especially in the shape of her nose; however, the format of the portrait means it is difficult to identify her with certainty.

[1] Scottish National Portrait Gallery, Edinburgh, *Raeburn's Rival: Archibald Skirving, 1749-1819*, 1999.

[2] T. Sundström, *ASPECTS OF THE LIFE AND WORK OF ARCHIBALD*

*SKIRVING* (1749-1819), University of St Andrews, 1999.

[3] B. Skinner, 'Archibald Skirving and his Work', *TRANSACTIONS OF THE EAST LOTHIAN ANTIQUARIAN AND FIELD NATURALISTS' SOCIETY*, vol. 12, 1970, pp. 46-57.

[4] Victoria and Albert Museum, number EVANS.218.