THE LIMNER COMPANY



JOSEPH LEE (1780 - 1859)

Portrait miniature of Princess Charlotte of Wales (1796-1817) in lace-bordered black dress, her hair curled and upswept

Circa: after 1817

after 1817

Enamel on copper

Oval, 58 mm (2 ¼ in.) high

Signed on the obverse, lower right, 'Lee'; also signed and inscribed on the reverse, 'HRH, Princefs [sic] Charlotte / of Saxe Coburg / Joseph Lee Pinx.t / after Rochard'

Princess Charlotte Augusta was the darling of the nation from an early age. She represented a beacon of hope after the tumultuous reign of her grandfather, George III, who had been incapacitated for over a decade with severe mental health difficulties, and her father, the Prince Regent and later George IV, whose profligacy, promiscuity and publicly acrimonious marriage made him extremely unpopular. As her father's only legitimate child Charlotte was heir presumptive, yet also a source of envy for George while she - on her rare public appearances - enjoyed the cheering crowds he could only dream of.[1]

Charlotte grew-up a pawn in the bitter feud that was he parent's marriage. Her mother was Caroline of Brunswick (1768-1821), who, by all accounts was as eccentric as her husband was cruel; Charlotte reportedly wrote of her parents: 'My mother was wicked, but she would not have turned so wicked had not my father been much more wicked still'.[2]

Since birth, Charlotte's access to her mother had been severely restricted by her father, who took little interest in her upbringing himself. When Caroline eventually left the country, Charlotte's companions consisted solely of governesses and servants, with an occasional visit to her paternal grandparents. Nevertheless, she seems to have been a buoyant and bright child, presumably with a very resilient spirit.

At the age of 17, Charlotte was engaged to Prince William of Orange (1792-1849), but, reluctant from the first, she ultimately broke-off the engagement. In the meantime, Charlotte had met and begun writing to the handsome Prince Leopold of Saxe-Coburg (1790–1865), then a lieutenant-general in the Imperial Russian army. It was she who suggested marriage and the pair were wed on 2 May 1816. The union was a happy one until Charlotte died tragically on 6th November 1817 after giving birth to a stillborn son.

The public outpouring of grief was considerable, and blame was directed at her parents' neglect and, to a greater extent, the accoucheur[3] in charge of Charlotte's care, Sir Richard Croft. The pressure on Croft was such that he committed suicide a few months later.

The portrait miniature by Simon-Jacques Rochard (1788-1872) from which the present enamel derives relates closely to Sir Thomas Lawrence's portrait of the princess [H.M. King of the Belgians].[4] Lawrence's oil dates to the fateful year of 1817. Just one year since her marriage, Charlotte is depicted by Lawrence with her left hand resting tenderly on her chest and prominently displaying her wedding ring.

There are two comparable works by Rochard, and while neither correspond exactly to clothing worn in the present work, this was likely due to reasons of propriety. The large, rectangular ivory miniature in the Royal Collection [RCIN 420199] depicts the Princess down to the waist, wearing a black dress with mutton sleeves falling off the shoulder, her white chemise just visible above the neckline. The other version, an uncertain attribution to Rochard at the Wallace Collection [Inv.: M41], is close to the first but with the addition of a transparent black shawl draped behind her shoulders. Whereas this portrait enamel shows the sleeves of her black dress firmly on her shoulders (and therefore just visible), as well as a standing lace collar. Due to the smaller size of the present portrait enamel, the artist likely felt that a composition of only a head and bare shoulders would be inappropriate for a what is probably a mourning portrait.

Joseph Lee is thought to have been self-taught in the art of enamelling, having come late to the profession following an unsuccessful career in business.[5] If this was the case, it is a true feat given the technical challenges in the medium of enamel and the finesse on the present example belies any lack of skilled training. Both Daphne Foskett and the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography record Lee as having been 'appointed' enamel painter to Princess Charlotte - the ONDB giving the date for the appointment as 1818. [6] Given the Princess died the previous year, the title can only have been self-styled in order to promote the portraits of Charlotte he exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1815, 1818 and 1823. [7]

[1] Lewis, J. (2020, June 11). Charlotte Augusta, Princess [Princess Charlotte Augusta of Wales] (1796–1817). Oxford Dictionary of National Biography. Retrieved 29 Jan. 2026, from https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-5160

[2] Holme, T., Caroline: A Biography of Caroline of Brunswick, 1980 (Atheneum), p.33, quoted in ONDB.

[3] It was fashionable at the time for ladies of ‘high birth’ to be attended my a male obstetrician rather than a midwife or physician.

[4] Charlotte’s husband would become the first King of the Belgians in 1830. A later copy can be found in the Royal Collection [RCIN 400164].

[5] Foskett, D., Miniatures: Dictionary and Guide, 1994 (Antique Collectors Club), p.411

[6] Ibid, & Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, vol.33, 2004, p.86

[7] As described in catalogue entry for RCIN 421866, accessed online 28/1/2026. All Lee’s enamels in the Royal Collection were acquired after the Princess’s death in the Victorian period.