

THE LIMNER COMPANY



JOHN DOWNMAN A.R.A (1749 - 1824)

Portrait of Mrs. Elizabeth Legge (née Musgrave; 1749-1820) seated on a red sofa facing left in three-quart profile, wearing a white cloak with a pleated standing collar, a black choker necklace

Circa: 1789

1789

Black chalk and watercolour on paper

Oval, 19.5 cm (7 ¾ in) high

Signed and dated lower left, '1789'

Later label on the back board inscribed, 'Miss Musgrave Mrs Heneage Legg / Honble Henry Legge / Blackheath / July 1.1820 H.L. / Elizabeth, daughter of Sir Philip Musgrave Bart / married to Heneage Legg / Esq – Ob:1820.'

John Downman was one of the most fashionable portrait artists of the high Georgian age. He worked rapidly and could take a portrait drawing in a matter of hours, the result never lacking finesse. The artist also used a blend of media[1] that made his portraits on paper, such as the present work, quite unique.

Downman prided himself on creating a true likeness of an individual with just enough flattery to please a client, stating in his 1820 publication 'The Original Portraits of Distinguished Persons' that "Painting is a visible fiction, yet its perfections depends [sic] on its resemblance to reality." [2] So too did he consider the accuracy of a sitter's dress important: "Costume in Portraits should always be preserved, for Truth and obvious reasons" [3]; although he did not always find himself impressed with trends: "In this Country the Fluctuations of Fashion is greater than in any other, and therefore is as often monstrous as graceful..." [4]

The artist's speed at taking a likeness allowed him to capture more informal moments and expressions. The coy half smile and slouched position on the sofa reveal this portrait to be intended for someone who knew the sitter intimately, most likely a family member or her husband. Indeed, it could be the exemplar for Downman's strongly held belief that "Portraits diffuse Friendship and renew Affection, even after Death: for what is represented faithfully, not only delights, but is ever a soothing memoir, the revives the dearest Feelings." [5]

Elizabeth Musgrave was the eldest daughter of Sir Philip Musgrave (1712-1795), 6th Bt. of Hartley Castle, Westmorland and his wife Jane Turton (d.1802). The Musgrave baronetcy had been associated with Hartley Castle for many generations, having been bought by Thomas de Musgrave in the mid-14th century. The castle had fallen into disrepair however since the family relocated to Eden Hall, Cumberland, where Elizabeth was born. The castle was left a ruin when materials were taken from the building to repair the new family residence in the 18th century.

In 1786, Elizabeth married Heneage Legge (1747-1827), a cousin of William Legge, 2nd Earl of Dartmouth (1731-1801) and son of The Hon. Heneage Legge (d. 29 August 1759), formerly Baron of the Exchequer, and his wife Catherine Fogg (d.1759). Downman made a portrait of the same dimensions depicting her husband also in an interior setting, which is likely a pendant to the present portrait.[6] Three of his cousins also had their portraits taken by Downman in 1802/3.

The couple resided at Idlicote, Warwickshire where both husband and wife are buried at St James the Great church. The pair were not survived by any children and 'The Hon. Henry Legge', who once owned this portrait, was likely her husband's cousin once removed, Henry Legge (1765-1844) the fourth son of the 2nd Earl of Dartmouth and a barrister who sat to Downman himself in 1802.[7]

[1] Downman would draw with black chalk and stump over graphite, and use watercolour on both sides of a wove paper.

[2] Downman, J., 'The Original Portraits of Distinguished Persons Painted and Drawn in the last half Century to 1820 by John Downman', Volume 1st, Fitzwilliam Museum no.2314, Preface, quoted in Munro, J., *John Downman 1750-1824; Landscape, figure studies and portraits of 'Distinguished persons'*, 1996 (The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge), p.76

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid.

[6] A 20th-century archival record documents it in the collection of Lord Templemore, Dunbrody.

[7] JOHN DOWNMAN, The Honourable Mr Henry Legge, of Lincoln's Inn, 1802. Listed in 'The Original Portraits of Distinguished Persons Painted and Drawn in the last half Century to 1820 by John Downman', third series, vol. 1, no. 16.