THE LIMNER COMPANY



DUTCH SCHOOL (17th Century)

A Lady in the guise of Esther, wearing low-cut apricot-coloured dress with gold chain, multicoloured fan and ribbons and feathers in her loose hair, a dog wearing a bell collar in her left hand

Circa: circa 1630s

circa 1630s

Oil on copper

Oval, 77 mm. (3 in.) high

This unusual composition of the present portrait, showing the sitter with her eyes lowered and wearing ‘Persian’ style clothing, suggests that she is painted in the guise of Esther.

Esther was a biblical queen celebrated for her resilience in the face of persecution. She was particularly important to Dutch communities in the 17th century as she came to embody the Netherland’s religious and political independence in the face of oppressive Spanish rule. Queen Esther hid her Jewish identity as the new wife of the king of the Persian empire of Ahasuerus, and spoke up against the king’s chief adviser, saving the Jews from annihilation. Netherlanders, including Rembrandt van Rijn (1606-69) and his contemporaries, embraced Esther as a personification of their emerging nation’s identity, embodying the Netherland’s religious and political independence after almost a century of oppressive Spanish rule.

Personifications of Esther were also added to objects used by women and were popular as instructive examples for young women (for example, an embroidered cabinet with scenes from the Story of Esther, British 1665, is at Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 64.101.1335).

The young woman in the present work is dressed in the trappings of a Dutch princess. She wears not

one but two heavy gold chains, as well as gold earrings. Her pampered lap dog wears a gold necklace fit for royalty. But it is the ‘exotic’ accessories that identify this sitter as in the guise of Esther. Just as in Rembrandt’s majestic portrait, known as ‘A Jewish Heroine from the Hebrew Bible’, but more recently presumed to be Esther preparing for her entrance to the royal palace after three days and nights of fasting and prayer, the sitter in this small oil wears a thin jewelled and ribboned band with feathers over her loose hair.[1]

The sitter in the present work wears contemporary dress of the 1630s, but her brightly coloured feathers and ribbons, shown in her hair and fan, remind us that the Netherlands was full of goods brought by ships belonging to the Dutch West India Company. These were useful in the depiction of Esther who was usually portrayed wearing what the artist saw as ‘exotic’ approximations of Persian dress.

The small dog in this oil on copper portrait likely from the ‘spaniel’ family was also a common addition in paintings thought to depict Esther. Dogs can be found in the Hebrew Esther Scrolls (Megillot): (illuminated Esther scrolls from the 17th and 18th centuries) including a 17th-century scroll (Gaster Hebrew MS 711) which shows a dog at Haman's feet, likely symbolizing the degradation of the villain. Other 17th century artists included dogs as companions for Esther, including Jan Steen (1626-1679) (‘Wrath of Ahasuerus’ 1673) and Artemisia Gentileschi's (1593-1651) ‘Esther before Ahasuerus’ (1620s).

[1] Rembrandt van Rijn. *A Jewish Heroine from the Hebrew Bible*, 1632-1633. Oil on canvas. 109.2 x 94.4 cm. National Gallery of Canada, purchased 1953.