THE LIMNER COMPANY



SWISS SCHOOL, circa 1656

A pair of portrait enamels, likely depicting Lady Mary Bankes (1598-1661) and her son Sir Ralph Bankes (1631–1677)

Circa: circa 1656

Enamel on gold (2)

Set into gold bracelet clasp frames bordered with seed pearls

Circular, each 25 mm (1 in.) high

Lady Mary Bankes, known as ‘Brave Dame Mary’, is best known for her defence of Corfe Castle during its siege by Parliamentarian forces.[1] ‘Courage even above her sex’ was the eulogy written by her son Sir Ralph, now engraved on her memorial plaque in St Martin’s Church, Ruislip. Shown here in the garb of a wealthy widow, her ermine and large pearls eminently visible beneath her widow’s cap and hood, she and her family remained loyal to the crown during the English Civil War and into the Restoration of King Charles II.

The identification of the sitter as Lady Mary is partially based on an enamel portrait of her by the artist Henry Bone, dated 1821, framed with a portrait of Sir John Bankes, and now in the National Trust Collection at Kingston Lacy. This enamel portrait was, according to an inscription on the reverse, taken from a now lost miniature by John Hoskins (presumably John Hoskins Junior, as his father died in 1655) dated 1656.[2] This was said to have been in the possession of W. J. Bankes, and copied by Bone in London, May 1837, but is now no longer at Kingston Lacy. Mary’s widow’s attire is worn in mourning for her husband, Sir John Banks, in December 1644 while with King Charles I. As her entry in the Dictionary of National Biography states, it shows her as ‘as a determined widow’.

Mary's second son Ralph, like his father, studied law at Gray's Inn and is possibly shown here in his professional garb.[3] With his elder brother, John, Ralph embarked on a Grand Tour of Europe, bringing back art and books from the Continent. John died in 1656, unmarried at the age of 30, leaving Ralph to unexpectedly inherit the title and estate. Ralph had also encountered the painter Peter Lely (1618-1680) and the architect Roger Pratt (1620-1684), who he engaged to build a new home at Kingston Lacy. The facial features accord closely with his portrait taken by Lely around 1660 (now Yale Center for British Art, New Haven).

It is likely that while on their Grand Tour the brothers encountered the work of Jacques Bordier (1616-1684) and Jean Petitot (1607-1691). Both Bordier and Petitot had spent time in England, and were well acquainted with Anthony van Dyck, John Hoskins and his son, Hoskins Jnr. and Peter Lely, who self-consciously worked to fill the void left by van Dyck (whose early death coincided with the year Lely arrived in England). It is this artistic network which perhaps explains the close connection between these two enamels and the work of both Bordier and Petitot – they may have been painted in the workshop abandoned by Petitot when he left London around 1643 or in Paris where he then settled. It is known that enamels were taken from miniatures around this time – an example being Samuel Cooper's portrait of Frances Theresa Stuart, Duchess of Richmond and Lennox (1647-1702), copied by Petitot in 1665.[4] The close adhesion of the enameller to Cooper's distinctive brushstrokes confirms that miniatures were sent to enamellers to copy into this medium, which may have been the case with the present pair. Portrait enamels from this period depicting English subjects are extremely rare and some remain unattributed – such as the portrait of enamel of a man said to be John Thurloe, dating from the 17th century and thought to relate to a portrait miniature by Samuel Cooper (now in the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum; number 636-1882).

That they are painted on gold likely owes to the first portrait enamels' close association with goldsmiths and watchmakers; the earliest extant example being painted by Henri Toutin (1614-1683) in 1636[5], son of celebrated watch and locket enameller, Jean Toutin (1578-1644). Henri Toutin pioneered a stipple technique in enamel painting, quite different from the layered application of other enamellers. It can be admired to great effect in the present examples, although not as fine as Toutin's work, and that of his contemporary, Jean Petitot (1607-1691), who was quick to adopt this new practice.

It was quite usual for paired portraits of mother and sons, especially after the death of a father - see for example a pendant in the Kunsthistoriches Museum, Vienna, containing portrait enamels of Anne of Austria and her son, Louis (1638-1715) by Toutin [Inv. Kunstkammer, 1590], dated to the time of her husband's death. Like the Kunsthistoriches pendant, [1] [ER2] the present examples of a scale that were intended to be worn – a reminder that the dynasty would endure through the generations.

[1] The evidence surrounding this claim are currently under close examination by historians, as outlined

in the following article: https://dorsetlife.co.uk/queen-of-the-castle/ and in History Today, February 2015: ‘Lady Bankes defends Corfe Castle’

[2] A black and white image of this miniature can be seen in J.J. Foster’s ‘Wessex Worthies’, 1920, where it was then in the possession of Mrs. John Acland.

[3] While general fashion moved toward cravats, the legal profession retained a specific version of this collar. These "bands" were made of two rectangular pieces of linen or lace attached at the throat, which began to take on a stricter, longer form. By 1660, plain linen falling bands were becoming a marker of a professional or academic. During this period, lawyers often wore black, scholarly gowns over doublet-like suits with small waists Wigs made their first appearance in a courtroom purely and simply because that’s what was being worn outside it; the reign of Charles II (1660-1685) made wigs essential wear for polite society. The judiciary, however, took some time to convince; portraits of judges from the early 1680s still show judges defiantly sporting their own natural hair, and wigs do not seem to have been adopted wholesale until 1685.

[4] See Philip Mould Gallery catalogue for ‘Secret Faces’, for the exhibition June 2008, curated by Emma Rutherford, cat. no. 37 (pp. 88/89).

[5] Portrait enamel of King Charles I, signed and dated on the reverse, ‘henry Toutin / Orphevre a paris a fait ce cy lan. / 1636’, enamel on gold – Rijksmuseum [SK-A-4370]. https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/collection/object/Karel-I-1600-49-koning-van-Engeland--fb9cf0ca23acd9dea9929b335e7e45e8?tab=data