THE LIMNER COMPANY



A portrait watercolour of a Lady, wearing diaphanous white dress and veil with gold braided edge

Circa: circa 1818

On paper or vellum

Gilt metal frame

Oval, 139mm (5.3inches) high

This portrait drawing hails from a unique period in Isabey's career, when he was painting delicate watercolours on paper, card or vellum. His portraits of women from this time show them in veils which swirl around their heads seemingly unsupported. This gave the illusion of lightness and movement – a departure for an artist who spent the earlier part of his career working in glossy detail, painting on ivory. This arquelle, or transparent watercolour, on paper, made the old style on ivory seem stiff and artificial. Isabey's former master, Jacques-Louis David, after seeing one of these stated; 'I don't know if it is done in oil or vinegar, but it's good; my god, it's good'.

Born in Nancy, Isabey's talent was clear from an early age. After studying in his home town, he moved to Paris age the age of 19, with a letter of recommendation addressed to Dumont, the Lorraine-born miniaturist and 'Premier peintre' to the Queen. After using his skills to paint snuff boxes and buttons, he was finally introduced at court in Versailles and became of pupil of Jacques-Louis David in 1788.

As with many artist's, Isabey lost patronage during the French Revolution, but managed to rebuild himself a client base through his friendship with David, exhibiting many miniatures at the Paris Salon in 1793. During the Directory period he frequented drawing rooms of Mme Tallien, Mme de Stael and

Mme Récamier, becoming a friend both of the young general Bonaparte and his wife Josephine – he was later to be appointed drawing master to Josephine's children Hortense and Eugène.

Isabey then became a central figure of the Empire and was appointed painter-draughtsman of the Emperor's Cabinet, ceremonies and foreign relations. His exacting standards can be seen in his response to Napoleon's request for drawings of the ceremonies planned in Notre-Dame de Paris, for 2 December 1804. In two days, with the help of his wife, Isabey dressed in apaper 100 small wood dolls, drew a plan of the cathedral and represented, on a table, the ceremony as it was going to take place. At Napoleon's request, Isabey then collected his drawings in the Livre du Sacre.

This was just the start of the artist's success. He became successively: painter and draughtsman for His Majesty's cabinet; painter and draughtsman for ceremonies and foreign relations; organiser of public festivals and fêtes at the Palais des Tuileries; draughtsman of the Seal and of Titles; first painter of the Empress Josephine's chamber; decorator for the imperial theatres; and drawing teacher to the Empress Marie-Louise, in which role he succeeded Prud'hon.

Decked as he was with titles and also privileged to have the monopoly on miniature portraits of Napoleon, for the most part destined for diplomatic presents, Isabey executed during the Empire period several large-format sepia drawings, some of which were exhibited at the Salons, notably: The First Consul's visit to the manufactory of the frères Sévène in Rouen in 1804 and The Emperor's visit to the Oberkampf manufactory, in Jouy in 1806.

From 1809 he had a studio in the porcelain factory of Sèvres and painted there, amongst others, the protraits for the top of the famous "Table des Maréchaux". After Napoleon's marriage to Marie-Louise in 1810, Isabey became drawing master to the new Empress. Isabey painted Marie-Louise several times. Indeed, at the Salon of 1810 two watercolour portraits of Marie-Louise and Napoleon in their marriage costume were displayed; they were subsequently sent to Francis I of Austria (Schatzkammer, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna).

In 1811, the birth of the King of Rome, gave him the opportunity to commemorate the scene of the presentation of the child by the new mother to Napoleon. He also produced miniatures and in 1812 executed a portrait of Marie-Louise and other members of her family (painting them in Vienna – these portraits are now in the Albertina Museum). In 1814, Isabey remained faithful to Napoleon, despite being much affected by the death of his seventeen-year-old son during the Campagne de France. At Fontainebleau, the Emperor enjoined the artist to serve Louis XVIII as energetically as he had served him.

During the First Restoration, Isabey went with Talleyrand to Austria for the Congress of Vienna. He pursued a career which found favour not only with Napoleon during the Hundred Days but also with Louis XVIII and Charles X, becoming for the former 'dessinateur et ordonnateur des fêtes et spectacles de la Cour' (1823), and for the latter 'dessinateur du Cabinet' (1828). He was furthermore awarded the Légion d'honneur in 1825. Finding favour with the government of Louis-Philippe, he was appointed in 1837, 'Deputy Curator of the Royal Museums'. With the return of a Napoleon to the throne (Napoleon III), Isabey now old and weak both in sight and hand received a pension of 6,000 francs. In 1853, Napoleon

Ill made him Commander of the Légion d'Honneur. Isabey died aged 88, and he was buried in Père Lachaise cemetery (20e division).