THE LIMNER COMPANY



Portrait miniature of Maria Anne Fitzherbert (née Smythe; earlier married name Weld; 1756-1837), wearing white dress, with gold band and gloves, stood in front of a column with red drapery and a landscape background

Circa: 1789

1789

Watercolour on ivory (Licence HW2VD7QG)

Oval, 106 mm (4 ⅕ in) high

Inscribed verso '1789./ H.B.G …/ Mrs Fitzherbert./ after a picture of/ Sir Joshua Reynolds/ By W. Grimaldi, Enamel/ Painter to H: R: H: Prince/ of Wales.'

Papier-mache frame with gilt-metal surround and foliate surmount

The relationship between Maria Anne Fitzherbert and George, Prince of Wales, later George IV, is closely intertwined with the story of miniature painting in the late 18th century. It is believed that the craze for eye miniatures that emerged in this period was begun by the Prince, when he sent a miniature portrait of his eye to Maria, as a token of his love. George had a reputation for being a ladies' man, though it is said that Maria was the only woman he ever truly loved.

Maria had been widowed twice by the time she first met George in 1784. She was six years older than the Prince, and he soon became smitten with her. She was a Catholic, meaning that if they ever married, George would have lost his right to inherit the throne, though this did not stop him from proposing to her with a ring borrowed from the Duchess of Devonshire. They were married a year later in a secret ceremony. George and Maria should not be confused with Prince Augustus Frederick, George's brother, and Augusta Murray, who were also married in secret a few years before.

George split with Maria in 1794 and was forced to marry Caroline of Brunswick (1768-1821) to please both his father and parliament. Despite this change, it seems that Maria never fell out of love with her prince, and she remained a companion throughout his life, bar periods during which she was practically exiled from the court.

Maria Anne Fitzherbert is listed as a sitter in a catalogue of Grimaldi's works produced by a descendant of the artist in the 19th century. It is not surprising that he would have painted Maria, given that he was the Prince of Wales' enamel painter. There are two enamel miniatures of her listed, one of a Mistress Fitzherbert and one of a Mrs Fitzherbert. As they are not illustrated, it is not possible to confirm which of these the present miniature is. However, it is highly likely that this is the miniature painted by Grimaldi for himself, listed as 'Mrs' rather than 'Mistress', as she is named 'Mrs' on the inscription on the reverse of this miniature. It should be noted that this portrait of Maria is not a direct copy of the portrait painted of the same sitter by Joshua Reynolds in the National Portrait Gallery (L162), but it is likely that Grimaldi either took artistic licence when painting this miniature, or took it from a work which has since gone untraced.

Exhibitions

London, An Evening Soiree at King's College, 1857;

London, Ironmongers Company Fine Art Exhibition, May 3-5 1861.

Literature:

A.B Grimaldi, *A Catalogue, Chronological and Descriptive, of Paintings, Drawings, & Engravings, by and after William Grimaldi, R.A., Paris.*, London, 1873, no. 33, p. 15.