THE LIMNER COMPANY



Circle of SIR GODFREY KNELLER (1646 - 1723)

King William III (1650-1702), wearing armour with a lace cravat and the Garter sash

Circa: circa 1690

circa 1690

Oil on copper

Oval, 214 mm. (8½ in.) high

Original carved lime wood frame, stained and with gilt on the inner edge (450 mm. high)

This fine cabinet portrait of William III appears to be an entirely unique portrait of the King in oil on copper at this scale. The portrait also survives in its magnificent original frame, carved in the style of Grinling Gibbons (1648-1721).

The image follows Sir Godfrey Kneller's courtly portraits of the monarch, who had been appointed Principal Painter to William and Mary in 1688. The head seems to have been lifted from the artist's full-length portrait of the King now housed in St. George's Hall at Windsor Castle.[1] Yet an engraving in the Royal Collection,[2] after another now lost portrait of William by Kneller, is almost identical to the present portrait, lending to the theory that it could be by Kneller himself. Certainly the quality of the work would indicate it was painted by a highly skilled artist, and it has similarities with Kneller's own small-scale portraits, although no other work on copper is known by the artist.

The portrait is housed in a limewood frame, hand-carved with an ornate floral ornamentation. The design includes orange blossom and a large tulip, which signify the House of Orange and the King's Dutch heritage. Much like the portrait itself, the frame design appears unique within British art of the period. A comparable, slightly smaller example associated with the celebrated carver Grinling Gibbons can be found at the Victoria and Albert Museum collection,[3] originally from Cassiobury House, Watford (since demolished).

Although unlikely to be by Gibbons himself, this frame has almost certainly been carved by a student of the great master. Gibbons ran a large workshop, but the quality of the frame suggests it was likely made by a recognised artist rather than an unnamed studio assistant. His principal followers include Jonathan Maine (fl. late 17th century), who worked with Gibbons at Burghley House and independently of Gibbons in Oxford decorating churches by Sir Christopher Wren; Thomas Young (fl. late 17th century), who worked with Gibbons at Sudbury Hall and Burghley; Samuel Watson (1662-1715), who also worked with Gibbons at Sudbury and Burghley before completing extensive work at Chatsworth House independent of Gibbons; and Edward Pearce (1630-1695), who worked with Wren on London churches but predominantly in stone.

Gibbons and his followers were employed at some of England and Scotland's grandest country houses. They would execute carved decorative schemes across multiple rooms including staircases, balustrades, overdoors, overmantles, garlands and portrait surrounds. Almost exclusively carved in very pale limewood, the decoration was usually left in its natural state (or sometimes whitewashed) and intended to stand brightly against a contrasting background - often darker wood panelling. Many pieces, including the present example, were later stained darker by the Victorians in the 19th century.

The grandeur of this frame, which measures 450 mm in height, and the manner in which the aforementioned wood carvers worked in this period, suggest it may have been part of such a larger carved decorative scheme. A notable, larger scale comparison exists in two half-length portraits of Kings Charles II and James II also wearing armour and the Garter ribbon, and housed in carved limewood oval frames in the style of Gibbons, both previously in the collection of Elias Ashmole and presented to the Ashmolean Museum in 1683 [WA1898.40 & WA1898.39]. It was usual in country houses to display portraits of kings and queens along corridors, and the scale of the Ashmolean portraits suggest they may have been displayed in this way. The scale of William III's portrait suggests however that it may have been displayed in a 'cabinet room'.

Unlike portrait miniatures, portraits of this size or 'cabinet portraits' were often commissioned to be displayed in a room dedicated to small artworks and curios. Collectors assembled and displayed prized pieces in such rooms where they might be shown to guests. It would be usual for royal portraits to number among these, especially during the tumultuous 17th century which had seen civil war, a king beheaded, a king restored, and a king deposed with – just two years prior to the approximate date of the current portrait – the so-called Glorious Revolution when William III and his wife Mary II (1662-1694) had acceded as co-monarchs. Far from settled, at the time this portrait was likely painted, their rule was threatened by James II's Irish uprising, which was put down brutally by William at the Battle of the Boyne in 1690. The Jacobite threat would continue however and a fine martial portrait such as this, proudly framed as it is and painted by an artist in the circle of the King's own Principal Painter (or even perhaps by his own hand), would show strong allegiance to William and Mary, and possibly advertise a court connection.

[1] Sir Godfrey Kneller (1646-1723), William III (1650-1702),1690, oil on canvas, Royal Collection Trust, St. George's Hall, Windsor Castle (RCIN 405675). https://www.rct.uk/collection/search#/1/collection/405675/william-iii-1650-1702-0

[2] Sir Godfrey Kneller (1646-1723), *GULIELMUS III Dei Gratia Angliae, Scotiae Franciae Hiberniae Rex Fidei Defensor &C*, c.1689-1702, engraving, Royal Collection Trust (RCIN

603085). https://www.rct.uk/collection/search#/1/collection/603085/gulielmus-iii-dei-gratia-angliae-scotiae-franciae-hiberniae-rex-fidei-defensor-c.

[3] Unknown artist, Frame or ornament for picture of limewood, oval, carved with flowers, accompanied by wheat, barley, pea-pods, acorns, and berrries; circa 1680, carved limewood, Victoria and Albert Museum (Acc. No. W.33-1926). https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O370580/frame-unknown/.