THE LIMNER COMPANY



ENGLISH SCHOOL (17th century)

An oil portrait of a Lady, likely to be an English or Swedish Noblewoman, with eleven (11) Costume 'mica' talcs*

Circa: 17th century

17th century

The portrait oil on copper; the costume overlays painted on 'mica' talcs;t he whole with original leather box with clasp

Oval, 81 mm. (3 $^{1}/_{4}$ in.) high

Original leather case

Portraits with 'mica' talc overlays are extremely unique and delicate objects that originate from the mid-seventeenth century. Though there are no names linked to the creation of these objects, similarities between many existing examples have led to the suggestion that many were made in the same workshop.

This miniature was an object intended to be used as well as just seen. The eleven overlays all feature different costumes that can be laid over the unknown lady's portrait to dress her up. Some of the best-known examples of these miniature sets depict Charles I (1600-1649) and Henrietta Maria (1609-1669), and they seem to have gained popularity in England around the time of Charles I's death. In this context, it is possible to suggest that the 'dress-up' aspect of these objects had political undertones, too. Many of the portraits of Charles I are paired with 'costumes' relating to his trial and Martyrdom. Portraits of Henrietta often come with 'male' costumes amongst others, as a reference to her involvement in court masques and disguised flight from England. Another example, in the Nordic National Museum, depicts Queen Christina (1626-1689), who can be dressed up in both male and female costumes. Christina, like Henrietta, was known for having dressed up during her life, most famously as a man to escape Sweden upon her abdication.

Though the woman in this portrait is unidentified, her overlays suggest that there was a similar political message behind the costumes she wears. This is most evident in the talc with five male figures painted onto it, which appears to depict some form of trial or political meeting. There is also a male costume, which puts the sitter in a buff coat and cloak, and multiple examples of 'exotic' dress, including a Turkish headdress and Venetian hood.

There appear to be two particularly productive centres of production of these miniatures: Sweden and England. Many of the talc sets depicting women now in public and private collections appear to have been painted by the same hand, and it can be suggested that the present work was painted in the same workshop as the portraits of Queen Christina[1] and of Kerstin Hahn (d.1656) in the Nordic Museum, Stockholm,[2] Queen Henrietta in the Royal Collection,[3] and King Charles I in the National Portrait Gallery.[4] In fact, the overlay with five men for this miniature is repeated in the National Portrait Gallery's set. It is not known who was involved in this workshop, but given the range of nationalities of the people they were depicting, they were clearly rather peripatetic.

Another interesting comparison is the portrait of *Two Women Wearing Cosmetic Patches* at Compton Verney. In this portrait, which remains unattributed, a black and white woman stand side by side, both wearing cosmetic patches which are of the opposite colour to their skin. Again, there are many similarities between the style of these portraits and of the copper portraits in these talc sets, and it could be suggested that this double portrait was produced in the same workshop. There is a moralising aspect to the double portrait, and an inscription, reading '*black with white bespott: y[o]u white w[i]th blacke this Evill /proceeds from thy proud hart, then take her: Devill'*, condemns both women for the sin of vanity. Cosmetic patches were used to cover blemishes, as well as a fashionable accessory. Given the presence of similar patches on multiple overlays in the present set, it is possible to consider that the same moral message was intended to be communicated through this portrait.

* The eleven costumes are:

1. A white hood with tie, and pink bows on the bodice.

2. Black hood with Dutch headpiece and white bow, pearl earrings.

3. Black doublet, surrounded by five gentlemen wearing black jackets and hats.

4. A man's black doublet and white shirt.

5. A nun's habit.

6. A black Venetian hood with pearl earrings and white bows on the bodice.

7. An Ottoman- inspired headdress, with yellow jacket with black collar.

8. A black dress and coif, black earrings.

9. A yellow dress with lace trim, red sleeves, pearl earrings and a crown.

10. A yellow dress with white sleeves, pearl earrings and a crown.

11. A white and yellow headdress with white liripipe, and yellow bows on the bodice.

[1] Collection number NM.0266394+.

[2] Collection number NM.0081682. It should be noted that this set was given to the museum with a historic attribution to ‘N. H. Sjöborg’, however this is more likely to be a reference to a previous owner in the eighteenth century.

[3] Collection number RCIN 422348.

[4] Collection number NPG 6357.