THE LIMNER COMPANY



Portrait miniature of a Gentleman, wearing a pale grey coat, a scarlet waistcoat embroidered with flowers, and white stock, his powdered wig worn en queue

Circa: 1777

Watercolour on ivory (licence 3B748UD5)

Oval, 28 mm (1 1/8in) high

Signed with initials and dated, 'J S/ 1777'

Original gold frame, the pierced silver border set with 16 cushion-cut diamonds, later gold reverse with brooch pin.

The skill for detailed characterisation that made John Smart an exceptional miniaturist are evident in the ruddy face of this 18th-century gentleman. To indulge in some speculation… the sitter's portly complexion was typical of the rising numbers of over-indulged gout sufferers of the 18th century. Much as a fuller figure was a signifier of wealth and health, gout was seen as a desirable condition given that it was often a complaint of the nobility.[1] This gentleman was certainly a man of privilege – his florid visage complemented by a richly embroidered (likely silk) waistcoat.

Smart was very well established as a miniaturist by the mid-1770s, prolific in the portraiture of the moneyed middle classes as well as the occasional aristocratic sitter, including the Duchess of Devonshire. Indeed, a contemporary commentator suggests Smart's greed for work and money led him to neglect his wife, Marianne (née Howard)[2], who, two years' prior to the date of the present miniature, had run off with fellow artist William Pars (1742-1782). The painter and writer Thomas Jones (1742-1803) described how Pars and Marianne had met while Smart was 'busy at home, making his fortune'.[3] When Pars (a scoundrel by all accounts) left London for Rome with Marianne in tow in 1775, Smart, according to Jones, 'waited only for Sufficient Evidence to substantiate a criminal process against him'.[4] The pair may have married once in Italy or simply lived as husband and wife, as tragically a 'Mrs Pars' was recorded as dying of tuberculosis in Rome shortly afterwards.[5] Smart didn't waste much time finding another companion however, and in 1776 had a son with Sarah Midgeley (dates unknown): John

Smart Junior(1776-1809), who later also became an artist.[6]

A happier event for Smart during this period was his appointment as Vice-President of the Society of Artists, which sought to rival the recently founded Royal Academy.[7] He had made a notable contribution a s Fellow of the Society for several years before being made Director. A portrait medal of Smart was struck in 1777[8] presumably in commemoration of the event. Towards the end of the following year, the Society elected Smart as President.

[1] Gout was also thought to ward off other illnesses and even have aphrodisiac properties. See Scholtens, M., 'The glorification of gout in 16th-to 18th-century literature', Canadian Median Association Journal Vol. 179, Issue 8, 7 October 2008 – accessed online 6/3/2026 https://doi.org/10.1503/cmaj.080312

[2] Recent research has uncovered his first wife's name, previously unknown - see Rutherford, E., Hendra, L., John Smart: A Genius Magnified, catalogue to the exhibition held at Philip Mould & Co. 25 November – 9 December 2014, p.12

[3] Memoirs of Thomas Jones, Walpole Society, Vol. XXXII, pp.73-74 quoted in Fosket, D., John Smart: The Man and His Miniatures, p.10

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid, pp.10-11

[6] Sarah Midgeley would remain his partner for sometime and he fathered another child by her out of wedlock, Sarah (1781-1853). Although they never married, Smart made provision for her and the children when throughout his decade spent in India (1785-1795). He later married Mary Norton (1783-1851), who also bore him a son, John James. See Rutherford & Hendra, pp. 14, 82, 86

[7] Fosket, p.7

[8] It was modelled by Joachim Smith and cut by John Kirk. Several versions of the medal are extant, in both bronze (see Nelson Adkins Museum, F58-60/135 & 2018.10), silver and silver alloy.