THE LIMNER COMPANY

Portrait Miniature of an Earl, in blue coat with white waistcoat with red trim, white stock and cravat, his hair powdered; circa 1795

Circa: circa 1795

Watercolour on ivory (licence Q942QUD8)

Gilt-metal frame, the reverse with blue glass border surrounding central aperture to reveal initials JD and an earl's wax coronet surmount decorated with seed pearls, gold wire, and mother of pearl, the whole on plaited hair

Oval, 83mm (3 ¼ in) high

William Wood painted over 1,200 miniatures during his career, many of which were meticulously recorded in his own ledgers. These were once owned by G. C. Williamson, who included them in his 1921 Collecting Miniatures, and can be found in the collection of the National Art Library today. Wood was born in Suffolk and worked in many different parts of Britain, most notably London. Here, he exhibited at the Royal Academy and the British Institution.

Within his ledgers, Wood listed the sizes of ivory ovals he was using as the base for his portraits. The present work is a size ‘7’, the second largest of those listed. It can be dated to the mid-1790s, given the sitter’s powdered, but loosely worn, hair. Wood has used his characteristic short strokes in the background and face of the unidentified sitter, which contrasts with the smooth surface created with the paint on his clothing below. This draws attention to the extreme detail in the sitter’s face, which has been executed finely. The same technique is repeated in a similar miniature at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London (P.91-1931).

Historically, the gentleman in this portrait has been identified as an Earl. This suggestion comes from the wax earl’s coronet which decorates the reverse. Without any further information about the sitter, it is not possible to identify them. One possibility is ‘Mr John Dougan’ exhibited by Wood at the Royal Academy in 1799; however, it is not likely that Wood would have addressed his sitter in this way if he was an earl.

Wood died at a relatively young age, and towards the end of his life turned his interests to architecture and landscape gardening. He published an essay on the former, An Essay on National and Sepulchral Monuments in 1808, and included plans for the latter in the manuscripts he left alongside his ledgers.