

THE LIMNER COMPANY



JOHN SMART (1741 - 1811)

Portrait miniature of a Lady in a blue gown with lace collar and powdered pink hair

Circa: 1783

1783

Watercolour on ivory (licence LK5RAJ31)

Oval, 41 mm (1 $\frac{5}{8}$ in) high

Signed and dated 'J.S./1783' (lower left)

Original gilt-metal frame with paste surround, the reverse with plaited hair

Although the sitter remains unidentified, she would certainly have been considered fashionable in the early 1780s. Her blue gown, the bodice edged with yellow, shows slashed sleeves revealing the white fabric underneath. Together with her lace-edged collar, the slashed sleeves evoke the Van Dyck style costumes that originated in the century prior. The continued use of this type of costume through the second half of the 18th century is reflected in portraiture by artists like Joshua Reynolds (1723-1792)[1] and Thomas Gainsborough (1727-1788).[2] The use of this kind of dress was sometimes seen as part of an artist's attempt to position themselves as the "heir" to this master painter, and other times it was thought utilised by new money and "demireps" to legitimise their status by tying themselves to the past. [3] The lady here may well have belonged to one of these groups, though she may also have simply been a fashionable lady keeping with ongoing trends – like the coloured powder in her hair.

Smart's prices eventually came to rival full-scale oil portraits by well-known contemporary artists like Joshua Reynolds,[4] with recorded prices from 1798 coming to 25 guineas per person for his portrait miniatures.[5] Although the cost may not have been quite as steep in 1783, portrait miniatures by the esteemed artist were definitely still quite expensive, with his reputation having been well-established by this point.

This portrait miniature was painted while Smart lived and worked in London, a few years before he headed off to Madras in 1785. At this point in time, Smart was serving as President of the Royal Society of Artists, of which he was made a Fellow in 1765. He exhibited works here until 1783, the year in which the current miniature was made. In this year, the artist exhibited two miniatures: a portrait of HRH Prince of Wales (with others in a frame) and a miniature of an artist, on card.[6]

Perhaps most striking in this portrait miniature is the Lady's pink powdered hair. While this more daring fashion choice may not appear in large scale oil portraits, the private nature of portrait miniatures encouraged sitters to be a bit more bold in the way they dress for the portrait. Smart was raised as the son of a wigmaker, and it is possibly his exposure to this realm that led him to depict so many of these coloured powdered hairstyles. It may also explain his attention to detail in the accessories fastened to a lady's hair. Here, the sitter wears a fine veil, in others, pearls, feathers, and braids intricately adorn ladies' hair.

Although it may seem a rarity, coloured powders were indeed available at the time and shades of pink appear to have been widely adopted by Smart's clientele.[7] Despite controversial associations with French fashion, many in England still joined in on the trend. This particular fashion choice – like the Van Dyck style costume – has some ties with the nouveau riche in this time period, but it was not exclusively adopted by them. See for example, Smart's portraits of the Honourable Mr. and Mrs. William Irby who had long established wealth and belonged to the landed gentry and nobility.[8]

[1] See Joshua Reynolds (1723-1792), *A Boy in Van Dyck Dress*, c. 1758, oil on canvas, 76.2 x 61 cm. Glasgow Museums Resource Centre [Acc. No. 263].

[2] See Thomas Gainsborough (1727-1788), *The Hon. Frances Duncombe*, c. 1776, oil on canvas, 92 1/4 x 61 1/8 in. (234.3 x 155.3 cm). The Frick Collection, New York [[1911.1.61](#)].

[3] Adam Eaker, *Van Dyck and the Making of English Portraiture*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022), pp. 127, 132.

[4] Aimee Marcereau DeGalan, "Pretty in Pink: John Smart's Penchant (or not) for Pink Hair" in *Portrait Miniatures: Artists, Functions, Manufacturing Aspects, and Collections*, ed. Bernd Pappe and Juliane Schmieglitz-Otten (Michael Imhof Verlag, 2026), pp. 182-3.

[5] Joseph Farington, *The Diary of Joseph Farington*, ed. Kenneth Garlick and Angus Macintyre, vol. 3 (New Haven; London: Published for the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art by Yale University Press, 1979), p. 1040.

[6] Algernon Graves, *The Society of Artists of Great Britain (1760-1791); The Free Society of Artists (1761-1783): A Complete Dictionary of Contributors and Their Work from the Foundation of the Societies to 1791* (London: George Bell and Sons and Algernon Graves, 1907), p. 236.

[7] Aimee Marcereau DeGalan, "Pretty in Pink", p. 183.

[8] John Smart (1741 - 1811), Portrait Miniatures of The Hon Mrs William Irby *née* Mary Blackman (c.1744-1792) and The Hon William Irby (1750-1830), 1781, watercolour on ivory. [For sale](#) with the Limner Company (as of 19 June 2026).