THE LIMNER COMPANY

Attributed to ROBERT BOWYER (c. 1758-1834) and JOHN SMART (1741-1811)

Portrait miniature of a Lady, wearing blue-trimmed white dress and fur-trimmed surcoat with slashed sleeves, her dark hair curled and worn plaited with pearls and a veil

Circa: circa 1782/3

circa 1782/3

Watercolour on ivory (licence WH9T19M4)

Oval, 50 mm (2 in) high

Gilt-metal locket

John Smart's distinctive technique is clearly shown here in the dress of the sitter's slashed surcoat and her tumbling dark brown hair. Both the dress and hair are almost identical to those in a portrait of Frances Baker (d.1782) , whose posthumous portrait Smart completed in 1783.[1] However, the lack of signature and date (both of which are inevitably found on Smart's miniature) suggest that this is likely a collaboration between Smart and a fellow artist.

Bowyer's career was closely intertwined with Smart's. Bowyer is said to have started his career by painting his own portrait for his sweetheart, Mary Shoveller, who later became his wife. He was taught miniature painting by Smart and was appointed guardian to Smart's children when Smart travelled to India.

He exhibited at the Free Society of Artists in 1782 and at the Royal Academy between 1783 and 1828. Bowyer was appointed miniature painter to King George III after the death of Jeremiah Meyer in 1789. He turned to publishing at one point in his career and was partly responsible for David Hume's Illustrated History of England (1792-1805). In 1796, his only daughter died and following this tragedy Bowyer and his wife took into their household a young orphan, Catherine Andras, who was to become a successful artist too – a talented wax modeller.

In the 1770s, Smart was running a successful studio and it was during this decade that Bowyer came to work for him. It is possible that this portrait was an attempt to share the workload – although there is no evidence of the inner workings of Smart's practice. From the extant portrait miniatures attributable to Bowyer alone, it is possible to see very close similarities between the distinctive face of the sitter here and his other works in miniature.

[1] Sotheby's, The Pohl-Stroher Collection of Portrait Miniatures, London, 6 December 2018, lot 53.