THE LIMNER COMPANY



JOHN SMART (1741 - 1811)

Portrait miniature of a Gentleman with powdered hair en queue and tied with a black ribbon, wearing a white stock and crimson velvet jacket and waistcoat

Circa: 1766

1766

Watercolour on ivory (licence PN83317L)

Oval, 1.3 inches, (33mm) high

Gilded metal frame with fausse-montre top

The present work is a fine example from Smart's first decade as a professional miniaturist. Painted when he was in his early twenties, the clarity of colour and attention to detail, which would characterise his later working practice, is already evident here.

In 1755, at the age of thirteen, Smart began to enter pencil and chalk drawings for prizes at the Society of Arts. After being awarded second place to Richard Cosway in the first competition his skill went on to secure first prize in the following three contests. The eighteenth century was a highly prosperous period for miniature painters, and witnessed the success of Cosway and Engleheart to name just two. During the 1760s, when the present miniature was painted, Smart was a rival to his peer Richard Cosway but his miniatures are markedly different; although both artists were painting portraits on a similar scale, Cosway opted for a more virtuoso style of painting, which he executed with a lightness of touch. Smart, however, embraced a more delicate, meticulous style as seen in the present work.

These early years provided Smart with the necessary confidence, contacts and drive, and in 1765 he was elected Fellow Royal Society of Artists (FSA), becoming director in 1772, Vice-President in 1777 and finally President in 1778, a position he held until the society's liquidation.

By 1766, the date of this miniature, Smart had been working as a professional artist for six years, practicing from premises in Dean Street, Soho, London. The business appears to have been remarkably successful in a short time, with Smart working hard to secure large numbers of sittings. His confidence and desire for recognition can be gauged by his initials appearing on even his earliest works, such as on this miniature, followed by a date; a practice his adopted for the whole of his working life.