THE LIMNER COMPANY



CORNELIUS JOHNSON (1593 - 1661)

A young Lady, wearing elaborate lace bands with a carnation rosette at her décolletage, and a black cord necklace as well as a pearl necklace and earrings, her hair tightly curled

Circa: 1629

1629

Oil on copper

Oval, 51 mm. (2 in.) high

Signed with initial and dated lower left, ‘CsJ / 1629’*

Later silver frame

This portrait of a fair-haired young lady is a rare, signed portrait on a miniature scale by Cornelius Johnson. The Anglo-Dutch artist is credited with introducing the medium of oil on a metal support to England,[1] where miniatures had hitherto been painted in watercolour on a vellum.[2]

While Johnson was born in London (to Flemish/German parents), his work owes a great deal to Continental style and tradition, including that of painting miniature portraits in oil on metal. He trained mainly in the northern Netherlands, returning to London by early 1619, and no doubt benefited from other immigrant artists working in London at the time such as Daniel Mytens (c.1590-1647) and Marcus Gheeraerts the Younger (1561/2-1636). Gheeraerts was known to the Johnson family, being present at the baptism of Johnson’s niece in 1612.[3] It has been suggested that Johnson may have trained with Gheeraerts after he returned from the Netherlands (likely 1618).[4]

The portrait dates to 1629, the same year Johnson painted the new French ambassador to London, Charles de l’Aubespine, Marquis de Chateauneuf-sur-Cher (1580-1653).[5] Prior to this, Johnson’s clientele had mostly consisted of minor nobility and elite professional/mercantile men and their families – this young lady likely belonged to such a group. The ambassadorial commission marks

the upward trajectory of his career having worked energetically throughout the decade.

By this time, Johnson was living (and likely working) in Blackfriars, close to where Anthony van Dyck (1599-1641) would soon be quartered and visited by King Charles I.[6] Just three years later in 1632, Johnson would be given his own royal appointment as 'his Majesty's servant in ye quality of Picture Drawer to his Majesty'.[7] The majority of the royal commissions that would follow seem to have been on a small scale - some original compositions of members of the royal family as well as miniature versions of larger works by Daniel Mytens or Van Dyck.

Johnson would often produce small scale versions of his own life-size canvas and panel portraits. Painted on metal and portable in size, these small portraits were robust, ideal for travelling and keeping one's person. It is sometimes possible to identify the primary large-scale portrait from which a miniature might derive. In this example, the sitter bears a notable (though not conclusive) resemblance to a portrait of an unknown lady in the Tate collection [T00745], also signed and dated by the artist to 1629.

Johnson's exquisite hand for detail leant itself to small scale portraits. His close attention to dress and the fact that he signed and dated portraits has made his *oeuvre* a useful source for fashion historians. Here the sitter wears the popular carnation colour in the rosette at her decolletage, a broad lace collar, a black cord about her neck and fashionable pearl jewellery. The large pearl drop earring and necklace show the move towards simpler jewellery following the colourful and elaborate Renaissance style of the previous generation. The lady's hair is dressed to the height of fashion of the 1620s: the hair either side of her head would have been kept short and is worn loose and tightly curled, a thin, short fringe is also curled, and - although not visible - the hair at the back of her head would have been grown much longer and secured in a knot. This hairstyle, or derivations of it, would pervade for several decades.

*Hitherto recorded as 1620, but when examined under magnification the inscription can be corrected to 1629, a date which fits better with the sitter's style of dress.

[1] Hearn, K., *Cornelius Johnson*, 2015 (Paul Holberton), p.46

[2] In the 16th and early 17th centuries, small scale portraits were called 'limnings' and traditionally painted in watercolour on vellum. The word 'miniature' to describe these small portraits did not come about until well into the 17th century and could technically only be applied to those painted in watercolour. It derives from 'minium', the Latin for red lead or vermillion, the pigment used for initial letters in illuminated manuscripts. The action of painting manuscripts, or 'illuminating' was the Latin word 'miniare' and the artist the 'miniator'. It was much later that the 'miniature' became a catch-all term for all very small paintings, including those in oil, enamel and plumbago.

[3] Ibid, p.11

[4] This is the date given by George Vertue (1684–1756), who credits his source as Johnson's great-nephew, Anthony Russel (or Roussell) (c.1663-1743). See Hearn, p.10

[5] Ibid, 21.

[6] Ibid, 18-19.

[7] Ibid, 22.

Literature:

Williamson, G. C., *Catalogue of the Collection of Miniatures, the Property of J. Pierpont Morgan,* London, 1906, I, p.134, no.169, illustrated pl. LXV