

# THE LIMNER COMPANY



**RICHARD COSWAY (1742 - 1821)**

**Portrait miniature of a Lady or an Actress, possibly in the guise of Artemisia holding the ashes of Mausolus**

Circa: circa 1770

circa 1770

*Watercolour on ivory (license 7PLA3C8Y)*

Oval, 51 mm (2 in) high

Signed with 'RC' monogram partially visible on plinth lower right

Set in the original gold clasp

This miniature is one of only five known miniatures to be signed (on the obverse) by the artist Richard Cosway. The other examples all relate to important early commissions of royal and well-known society figures: the Prince of Wales later George IV, circa 1780-82 [National Portrait Gallery, NPG 5890]; Mrs Abington as a Comic Muse, circa 1783 [collection of the Right Hon. The Earl of Shelburne]; Anne Seymour Damer, 1785 [National Portrait Gallery, NPG 5236]; and Margaret Cocks (formerly identified as Mary Russell) mourning an urn of her sister's remains, dated 1787 [Victoria and Albert Museum, accession no. P.51-1984].

Here, Cosway's monogram is partially visible on the stone plinth at the lower right of the composition. It follows the style of cipher used by the most illustrious artists to have worked in the miniature format, including Nicholas Hilliard, Isaac Oliver (circa 1565-1617), and Samuel Cooper, all of whom worked at the royal court and subsequently enjoyed elevated status themselves. The presence of his monogram on this early work therefore offers a glimpse into Cosway's ambition to align himself with these great miniaturists.

The tighter style of brushwork and comparatively saturated colouring date the miniature to the early

1770s. Cosway was then living and working at the grand address of 4 Berkeley Street, Piccadilly, which had previously been occupied by the Principal Painter in Ordinary to both George II (1683-1760) and George III (1738-1820), John Shackleton (d.1767).[1] While many of Cosway's contemporaries, such as Sir Joshua Reynolds, P.R.A. (1723-1792) and John Smart (1741-1811), were based in fashionable Leicester Square / Soho, Cosway had chosen to set up a practice in an area that was distinctly aristocratic, opposite Devonshire House and within a stone's throw of Carlton House and St James's Palace. Cosway's neighbours therefore included not just the royal family but the 'Devonshire House circle'.

It may be from this local milieu of aristocratic *bon viveurs* that the present sitter belonged. It was fashionable at the time for society ladies to be depicted with references to - or as characters from - classical antiquity and Cosway painted many such portraits. Georgiana Cavendish (*née* Spencer; 1757-1806), Duchess of Devonshire was his first repeat patron for portrait miniatures[2] and an early portrait by Cosway shows her in similar dress to the present work (wearing an identical band in her hair) feeding a pair of doves [Devonshire Collection]. Other comparable examples include portrait miniatures of Lady Sarah Bunbury, circa 1765-70 [Victoria and Albert Museum, accession no. P.64-1935]; the aforementioned portrait of Margaret Cocks; A Young Lady playing a Lyre [Christie's, 24 May 2000, lot 250]; and a Lady in the Guise of Hebe, c.1790 [Sotheby's, The Pohl-Ströher Collection of Portrait Miniatures, Part III, 5 December 2019, lot 307].

It's been suggested that the present sitter could be in the guise of Artemisia, who was typically depicted holding the ashes of Mausolus. Artemisia, queen of the ancient Greek city of Halicarnassus, is remembered for her immense sorrow at the death of her husband (and brother[3]), Mausolus. According to legend, Artemisia drank Mausolus's ashes before commemorating him with an immense building from which the term 'mausoleum' derives. While this characterisation may seem incongruous with the coquettish smile of the present sitter, when the romantic context of the miniature format is brought into consideration[4], Artemisia's story comes to represent loving devotion. Her drinking of the ashes could even have an erotic interpretation, a theory supported here by her flirtatious head tilt, the parting of her lips and the inclusion of a pair of cherubs/putti on the front of the urn.

Although it has not been possible to identify the sitter, she could have been a society lady such as Elizabeth Lamb, Viscountess Melbourne (*née* Milbanke; bap. 1751-1818). Lady Lamb had married Sir Peniston Lamb, second baronet (1745-1828) MP in 1769 and became a leading Whig

hostess. The pair moved to a large house in Piccadilly in 1770 and she became a close friend of the Duchess of Devonshire by 1774. She is said to have 'loved amateur dramatics'[5], had a 'mischievous personality' and conducted numerous extra-marital affairs - the earliest being with the artistic patron, George O'Brien Wyndham, 3rd Earl of Egremont (1751-1837), which possibly began in 1773. Her iconography shows this playful personality and interest in fancy dress and theatrics. A group portrait of Lady Melbourne with the Duchess of Devonshire and another of their close circle, Anne Seymour Damer (*née* Conway; 1749-1828), depicted as the three witches from Macbeth [by Daniel Gardner, 1775; NPG 6903], is thought to have been commissioned by Lady Melbourne. Cosway was later commissioned to paint her by the Prince of Wales (with whom she also had an affair) in 1784, and the resulting oil on panel portrait [Royal Collection Trust, RCIN 400967] shows her with a facial features similar to the present sitter, wearing romanticised Van Dyck dress. Interestingly, the portrait also bears the same rare 'RC' monogram as the present work.[6]

It was also common for actresses to sit for character portraits associated with one of their best-known roles or simply signifying their profession. Notable examples by Cosway include: Miss Elliott [Ann Elliott]

in the character of Pallas, 1769 [Fondazione Cosway, Lodi]; and the aforementioned portrait of Mrs Abington as Comic Muse, circa 1783, which also bears the artist's monogram.[7] Another woman of the arts worth noting was the writer and actress, Mary Robinson (*née* Darby; 1757-1800), whose patron was the Duchess of Devonshire by the mid-1770s. She was often known by the name of 'Perdita' after her most famous role in *A Winter's Tale*, and whom she was playing when she caught the eye of the Prince of Wales. He offered her a huge sum to become his mistress, which she eventually gave in to. Robinson reluctantly became somewhat of a celebrity as a result of the affair, and she was influential in her fondness for Grecian style dress.

In conclusion, while the sitter has yet to be identified, the portrait proves a fascinating study in the portraiture of prominent women in the 1760s-80s. She keeps her secrets for now but clearly exhibits the 'romantic antiquarianism'[8], as well as perhaps libertarianism, of London society during the period.

[1] Lloyd, S. (2008, January 03). Cosway, Richard (bap. 1742, d. 1821), artist and collector. Oxford Dictionary of

National Biography. Retrieved 24 Jun. 2026, from

<https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-6383> .

[2] A bill for works at the Fondazione Cosway, Lodi, shows that Cosway was producing works for the Duchess of

Devonshire between 1776-1789 [cited in Lloyd, S., *Richard & Maria Cosway; Regency Artists of Taste and Fashion*, 1995

(Scottish National Portrait Gallery), p.118, no. 54].

[3] It's generally thought that the marriage was dynastic and symbolic rather than incestuous.

[4] I.E. that it was often intended to be part of romantic exchange.

[5] Lady Melbourne took part in productions at the Duchess of Devonshire's theatre at Althorp House. See [https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw144816/The-Three-Witches-from-Macbeth-Elizabeth-](https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw144816/The-Three-Witches-from-Macbeth-Elizabeth-Lamb-Viscountess-Melbourne-Georgiana-Duchess-of-Devonshire-Anne-Seymour-Damer)

[Lamb-Viscountess-Melbourne-Georgiana-Duchess-of-Devonshire-Anne-Seymour-Damer.](https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw144816/The-Three-Witches-from-Macbeth-Elizabeth-Lamb-Viscountess-Melbourne-Georgiana-Duchess-of-Devonshire-Anne-Seymour-Damer)

[6] It may be significant that the very few portraits which bear the artist's monogram mostly depict sitters -or were commissioned by patrons - from overlapping the Whig social circles of the Devonshires, the Cosways and the Prince of Wales. Only two other works can be traced with a monogram: a double portrait of the children of whig MP Jacob, 2nd Earl of Radnor (1750-1828) in oil on canvas, 1785

[Private Collection]; a pen and ink self-portrait with busts of Michelangelo and Rubens in pen, circa 1789 [Fondazione Cosway, Lodi]; and a pencil and watercolour portrait of 'dandy' and close friend of Prince of Wales, Charles, 4th Earl Harrington, c.1800-5 [Cecil Higgins Art Gallery, Bedford]. Two other history pictures bear the monogram, both of which were remained in Cosway's or his wife's possession: The Anointing of Dead Christ, c.1800 [National Gallery of Scotland, inv. 5378], and Andromache and Astyanax, 1789 [Sir John Soane's Museum, inv.P120].

[7] Mrs Abington was often depicted as the Comic Muse alongside fellow actress Mrs Yates (Mary Ann Yates (*née* Graham; 1728–1787) as the Tragic Muse during this period. Yates's iconography largely represents her in her best-known role of Electra, for which she is depicted holding an urn, but always with a forlorn expression. However, her dates, the blue colour of the sitter's eyes (hers were said to have been hazel) and her more serious character make it highly unlikely she is the sitter of the present portrait.

[8] Lloyd, p.73.