THE LIMNER COMPANY



FRENCH SCHOOL (18th century)

Portrait miniature of Abelard and Heloise; he in black doublet and white ruff, she in white gown and veil, a red cloth and blue curtain in the background

18th century

Watercolour on ivory (licence 6765VM9W)

Circular, 60 mm (2 $^{3}/_{8}$ in) diam.

Gilt-metal frame with ribbon and acanthus leaves surmounts and easel back

The doomed lovers, Abelard and Heloise, were a popular subject in 18th century literature and in the visual arts. Famously, Angelica Kauffman, R.A. (1741-1807), imagined a meeting of the pair in ‘Abelard soliciting the Hand of Eloise’ (Burghley House) and in her paintings ‘The Parting of Abelard and Heloise’ or ‘Abelard and Heloise Say Farewell’, now in the Hermitage Museum.

In 1717, Alexander Pope published a verse epistle entitled ‘Eloisa to Abelard’, based on the well-known medieval story. Itself an imitation of a Latin poetic genre, its immediate fame resulted in many English imitations throughout the rest of the century, and other poems more loosely based on its themes. These writings were reflected in the visual arts – with painters and engravers producing images of scenarios where forbidden love is shown in moments of extreme tenderness. As with the present work, the dating of the costume is often moved forward to a more general ‘medieval’ or Elizabethan style.

The inspiration for this painting are the letters of Peter Abelard and Héloïse d'Argenteuil, who lived in France in the late eleventh and early twelfth-century and are taken from Abelard’s autobiographical writings the *Historia Calamitatum*. Abelard was born into a wealthy family in Brittany, was determined to become a scholar, and therefore studied philosophy and religion.

In 1115 Abelard met Heloise who was living in Paris with her uncle Fulbert. Abelard was then thirty-seven years old and an established teacher of philosophy and theology while she was in her early twenties and already known to be a brilliant scholar. He offered to teach her philosophy but the two fell in love, he seduced her, and she became pregnant. He moved her to his family home in Brittany where she gave birth to a son named Astrolabe. The two married in secret and Abelard then sent her to a convent in Argenteuil for her protection. It is possible here that the artist has intended to show Heloise in her convent gown as a bride of Christ.

Heloise's uncle took his revenge by having a band of men break into Abelard's room where he was mutilated and castrated. Abelard thereafter decided to enter religious life in a monastery and persuaded Heloise to enter a nunnery. The two continued to correspond and their letters are full of philosophical and theological musings and reminiscences concerning their love for one another. The present painting may have originally been intended for a snuff box.