THE LIMNER COMPANY



John Russell R.A. (1745 - 1806)

Colonel Thomas Thornton (1757-1823) with a peregrine falcon, wearing a beaver hat and grey coat, red vest and white bow cravat

Circa: circa 1786

circa 1786

Watercolour on ivory

Gold frame, the reverse with central panel of plaited hair surrounded by blue glass border, the whole set into brown leather travelling case; together with four reverse intaglios and a cameo brooch, mounted on a velvet-covered block and two volumes of A Sporting Tour Through Various Parts of France by Colonel Thornton, 1806, signed by the author T.W. Thornton. 1823. -

The miniature, oval, 72mm (2 53/64in.) high

Cameo brooch, oval, 30mm (1 3/16in.) wide

‘Cleopatra’ reverse intaglio, 22mm x 29mm (55/64 x 1 9/64in.)

‘Modish’ reverse intaglio, 22mm x 29mm (55/64 x 1 9/64in.)

‘Thornville 1809’ reverse intaglio, 10mm x 13mm (25/64 x 33/64in.)

‘Nan’ reverse intaglio, 10mm x 13mm (25/64 x 33/64in.)

This unusual portrait miniature of Colonel Thomas Thornton, featuring a handsome peregrine falcon, is a miniature version of a painting by John Russell and Philip Reinagle which was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1786. The original painting exists in three versions, one of which is owned by Castle Howard in North Yorkshire.

Colonel Thomas Thornton of Thornville Royal (now Stourton) in Yorkshire was born in St James's, London and was the son of William Thornton, M.P. for York 1747-54, who served with distinction under the Duke of Cumberland during the Scottish Rebellion. At the age of fourteen Thornton was sent to Charterhouse School where he commenced his education, before attending Glasgow University.[1] When William Thornton died in 1769, Thomas inherited his father's estate and was appointed colonel of his father's regiment, a role he undertook until 1795 when he was court-martialled for being absent following the expiration of his leave.

Thornton was a passionate sportsman, actively practising hunting, racing, shooting, angling, fishing and hawking, he could walk four miles in 32 minutes and he could supposedly leap as high as his own height (he was 5ft. 9in.).[2] He collected air weapons and multi-barrelled guns and rifles, declaring he had 'a greater quantity of sporting apparatus of the most valuable and curious manufacture than any other sporting gentleman in England.'[3] His love of hawking extended to naming his Yorkshire house Falconer's Hall and he was said to be the only falconer of 'modern times who procured a young goshawk from a nest in Great Britain.'[4] In 1772 he founded the Falconers' Club with Lord Orford, where he was awarded a falcon-themed silver-gilt tea urn by Wakelin and Taylor.[5] Thornton practised hawking whilst touring the Scottish Highlands from 1786 and Russell and Reinagle's portrait may have been painted just before Thornton departed for Scotland.[6] On his return he published an account of his tour A Sporting Tour through the Northern Parts of England and Great Part of the Highlands of Scotland.

Colonel Thornton was a keen Francophile and visited France a number of times, he was introduced to Napoleon in 1802 and presented him with a pair of pistols and joined several French hunting parties.[7] After the battle of Waterloo, Thornton moved to France permanently, purchasing an estate at Pont-sur-Seine and applying for citizenship which was either withdrawn or refused in 1817.

Thornton was notorious for having several mistresses including Alicia Meynell or Massingham, the daughter of a Norwich watchmaker, who was known as the 'Norwich nymph' and confusingly was often referred to as 'Mrs T' or 'Mrs Thornton,' as she took up residence with the Colonel for a time.[8] Alicia Meynell was an expert equestrienne and she advised Thornton on where to lay successful bets against his competitors. She famously raced against Captain Flint riding 'Thornville', the horse shown on one of Colonel Thornton's brooches, whilst she rode side-saddle on Thornton's horse 'Vingarella' at York in 1804; this was the first known race in Britain to feature a female jockey.

Alicia Meynell and Thomas Thornton parted ways in 1806, Alicia eloped with a soldier and Thornton married Eliza Cawston in Lambeth, who gave birth to a son William Thomas the following year in London. Thornton later lived in lodgings in Paris and died in the capital in March 1823 leaving his estate to his seventeen year old illegitimate daughter, Thornvillia Diana Thornton, by Priscilla Duins but his will was quickly contested by his widow and son, and French tribunals pronounced it invalid.

Although unsigned, this portrait miniature is extremely close in technique to the pastels of John Russell and fits well with his few extant portrait miniatures in watercolour. The bright, fresh colouring and pinkish ground for the flesh tones are both characteristic of his work. It was not unknown for Russell to paint both miniatures and pastels of his subjects (see his portrait in watercolour on ivory of George IV as Prince Regent, Philadelphia Museum of Art, used as the basis for his pastel of the same subject).

There is an inferior miniature of this same composition in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, thought to be painted by Philip Reinagle's daughter, Fanny. The dark pigments used in the Fitzwilliam miniature have significantly deteriorated when compared to this miniature, which is almost as bright as the day it was painted.[9]

The unusual reverse intaglios that accompany this portrait miniature of Colonel Thornton depict his favourite sporting animals. 'Thornville', 1809 was his horse that 'won the two Great Sweepstakes at York' and 'Cleopatra', belonging to the Duke of Ancaster, was 'The Dam of Thornville' and was described as a 'bay filly'.[10] 'Modish', a pointer bitch cross, was bred by Colonel Thornton and was from the same strain as 'Nan', who is also depicted in this set of intaglios. 'Modish' was involved in the sporting day of 10th April, 1809 when 250 sportsmen on Elbro-Down chased after 'Miss Taylor', Thorton's prize deer; 'Modish' got close but did not manage to catch her.[11] Finally the fifth piece to this set, a cameo, illustrates Thornton himself and is inscribed 'Col Thornton addressing the Chancellor

and recovering his estate 1805'.

[1] L. Stephens and S. Lee, Eds., The Dictionary of National Biography Vol. XIX (Oxford, 1917) pp.787-788.

[2] J.E. Harting, Bibliotheca Accipitraria A Catalogue of Books Ancient and Modern Relating to Falconry (London, 1891), pp.253-254.

[3] H.L. Blackmore, Hunting Weapons: From the Middle Ages to the Twentieth Century (New York, 2000), p.277.

[4] J.E. Harting, Bibliotheca Accipitraria A Catalogue of Books Ancient and Modern Relating to Falconry (London, 1891), p.254.

[5] H. Young, 'The silver designs of Sir William Chambers: a resumé and recent discoveries', The Silver Society Journal (Autumn 1995), p. 341.

[6] R. Bayne-Powell, Catalogue of Portrait Miniatures in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge (Cambridge, 1985), pp.24-5.

[7] L. Stephens and S. Lee, Eds., The Dictionary of National Biography Vol. XIX (Oxford, 1917) pp.787-788.

[8] In the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography vol XIX, it refers to Thornton as being married twice with the name of the first wife unknown, this appears to be incorrect and Thornton was only legally married once. Ed. L. Stephen & S. Lee, Oxford Dictionary of National Biography vol XIX (Oxford, 1960), pp.787-788.

[9] R. Bayne-Powell, Catalogue of Portrait Miniatures in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge (Cambridge, 1985), pp.24-5.

[10] W. Pick, The Turf Register and Sportsman & Breeder's Stud-book vol III (London, 1822) p.317

[11] The Sporting Magazine, April 1809, London, p.36

Literature:

Country Life Magazine, 8th June 2000, p.162