THE LIMNER COMPANY



ENGLISH SCHOOL (19th century)

A Lover's Eye miniature, with green iris

Circa: circa 1810

Set into original gold brooch with graduated pearl border (later seed pearl necklace)

Circular, 15mm (1/2in) high

When George, Prince of Wales, sent Maria Fitzherbert his eye miniature (he wrote 'I send you a Parcel. . . and I send you at the same time an Eye, if you have not totally forgotten the whole countenance. I think the likeness will strike you', he began a fad for eye miniatures which quickly caught on in his circle of friends. Eyes became the most intimate type of miniature – their identity known only to the wearer – set into brooches as with this example here. When an eye is separated from the rest of the face it becomes very difficult to ascertain the owner and thus began a guessing game of wearing eyes – the identity known only to the wearer. These eyes are now known as 'lover's eyes' – symbolising the secret nature of the most intimate of gifts.

Eye miniatures were rarely discussed in contemporary literature, adding further to their mystery. Horace Walpole suggested that the craze had originally come from France, writing a letter on 27 October 1785 to the Countess of Ossory stating:

'When human folly, or rather French folly, can go so far, it would be trifling to instance a much fainter silliness; but you know Madam, that the fashion now, is it not, to have portraits but of an eye? They say, 'Lord, don't you know it?' A Frenchman is come over to paint eyes here.'

Charles Dickens turns the erotic and secretive element of the eye miniature on its head in a subversive text which assumes that his readers would have understood the original purpose of eye miniatures. In

Dombey and Son (1848) Dickens introduces us to Miss Tox, an ageing spinster: 'when full-dressed, she wore round her neck the barrenest of lockets, representing a fishy old eye, with no approach to speculation in it.' On Miss Tox, the eye miniature perhaps presented to her when she had hopes of romance leading to marriage becomes an object of disgust, far removed from her youth.

Still in its graduated pearl frame this eye, like others of its type, is difficult to date from the painting alone. Nor is the gender of the person discernible – a peculiar feature of the lover's eye which makes them all the more mysterious.