THE LIMNER COMPANY



Luke Sullivan (1705 - 1771)

Portrait miniature of Kitty Fisher (1741? - 1767) wearing a pale pink dress and blue cloak, with blue ribbons in her hair

Circa: circa 1765

circa 1765

Watercolour on ivory (licence 9FDC68FV)

Oval, 35mm (1 $^{3}/_{8}$ in) high

Signed with monogram

Gilded metal frame

Born and raised in London, Kitty Fisher is said to have started work in a milliners shop prior to her fame. By 1758, she had become one of London's top courtesans, celebrated for her beauty and spirited personality. Regularly featured in the press and private correspondence in both critical and admiring terms, Kitty enjoyed immense fame. In Hone's well known 1765 portrait of her, now in the National Portrait Gallery London, the reflection of a gathered crowd can be seen in a goldfish bowl to Kitty's left, which is arguably a comment on her notoriety. A fall from her horse during a regular ride through St James' Park caused a plethora of publicity, much of which equated her literal fall with her metaphorical fall from morality with a warning for others to take heed.

Kitty's fame was enhanced by the several portraits for which she sat. Sir Joshua Reynolds painted her on at least four occasions between 1759-1766 fuelling rumours that they were lovers (which no doubt assisted the artist in finding new patrons and Kitty with her status as muse). Two of these portraits were engraved and reproduced, demonstrating the extent of her increasingly high profile. She had an extravagant lifestyle (once alleged to have eaten a £100 bank note on buttered bread) all of which was funded by her numerous wealthy lovers who included John Montagu, fourth earl of Sandwich, Marshal John, Earl Ligonier, and William Stanhope, second earl of Harrington.

In 1766 Kitty was married to John Norris (1740–1811), MP for Rye from 1762 to 1774, captain or governor of Deal Castle from 1766 to 1774, and son of John Norris, former MP and landowner, of Hemsted, Kent. Sadly, she died three months after her marriage, probably from consumption though small pox and lead poisoning from the cosmetics she used were also considered contributing factors. She was reportedly laid in state in her best dress. Her death inspired many writings including an epigram entitled ‘On Kitty Fisher's Dying Soon after she was Married’;

'She wedded to live honest—but, when tried,

the experiment she liked not—and so died.'

(Epitaphs, collected by T. Webb, 1775, 2.108, quoted in Hardy, 86)

Born in Country Louth, Ireland in 1705, Luke Sullivan came to London at a young age with his father who had obtained a position as valet to the Duke of Beaufort. The Duke helped the young Sullivan procure instruction in engraving, possibly from La Bas. Sullivan then worked as an assistant to William Hogarth, but was also a keen watercolourist. It was not until much later in his life that painting portrait miniatures became part of his oeuvre. In fact, his Portrait of a Lady in the Victoria and Albert Museum collection is one of his first miniatures, and is dated 1760 when he would have been fifty years old.

Kitty seems to have relied on Sullivan for her most private of portraits – the portrait miniature. This portrait is more simple and honest than many of her images, perhaps it was a gift to a friend or her future husband? While she retains the coquettish look that kept her admirers entranced, it is also devoid of jewels or accessories.