THE LIMNER COMPANY



JOHN SMART (1741 - 1811)

Portrait miniature of Frances Willock (1759-1806) wearing white dress with ruffled neckline and pearl bordered shoulders, her hair powdered

Circa: 1783

1783

Watercolour on ivory (P8QP3FS2)

Oval, 41 mm (1 5/8 in) high

Signed with initials and dated, 'JS / 1783'

Gold frame with blue glass and seed pearl border, the reverse glazed to reveal lock of hair tied with gold wire and seed pearls on opalescent glass, the whole in red leather case

Frances Willock was born Frances Gore and spent her upbringing at Tring Park, later owned by the Rothschild family. Originally built to a design of Sir Christopher Wren in 1685 and was visited several times by Charles II, Sir William Gore, the grandfather of the present sitter and Lord Mayor of London, bought the house in 1705 and it remained in his family for two subsequent generations. In 1786, a year after Frances's marriage to Francis Willock, it was sold to Sir Drummond Smith, a London banker, who refurbished the interior in Georgian style and remodelled the park in the fashion made popular by "Capability" Brown. William Kay, a Manchester textile magnate, bought the estate in 1823 and in 1838, Nathan de Rothschild began renting Tring Park as a summer residence. When the property was sold in 1872, Lionel de Rothschild bought it as a wedding present for his son, Sir Nathaniel (later Lord) de Rothschild.[1]

Frances's marriage – to another Francis (Willock) – in 1785 – began a dynasty of fascinating travellers. One of their sons, Lt. George Willock (1793-1870), of the 47th Madras Infantry, had served as the chief of Sir Gore Ouseley's lifeguard during Ouseley's embassy to Iran in 1811-1812. He was considered "an excellent Persian scholar.". Another son, Sir Henry Willock (1788 or 1790-1858), joined the Madras cavalry. He accompanied Sir Harford Jones-Brydges on his mission to Persia as interpreter, and was afterwards resident at the court of Teheran (1815–26), described as'the only European in the capital'.

He became director and then chairman of the East India Company. Their grandson, also Henry, was born 1830, at Oujoun, Persia (now Iran). He also joined the military, distinguishing himself as the only civilian recipient of the Indian Mutiny Medal with three clasps for Defence of Lucknow, Lucknow, and Central India. He was one of the first Europeans to enter the Bibigarh, the scene of the massacre of about 200 British women and children, which was to become for the British public the most distressing image of the uprising. A letter to his parents detailing these events was published in The Times on 1st February 1858; it is a candid and engaging description of the fear, exhilaration, and boredom experienced by a young man at war. After the relief of Lucknow, Willock helped escort the women and children from the residency to safety at Allahabad.

In November 1858 Willock was appointed joint magistrate of Shahjahanpur. In 1859 he returned to Britain on furlough, and in the same year, on 27 October, at Barnes, Surrey, married his cousin Mary Elizabeth, only child of Major Charles L. Boileau of the rifle brigade.

The connection between the artist John Smart and the East India Company was formed in the years prior to him leaving for Madras. It is likely that he painted Frances here in 1783, a few years before her marriage, allowing the six months for the miniature to travel to her betrothed in Madras, India. She is likely to have followed her portrait to join her husband, her marriage taking place in the same year that Smart himself arrived. These vital connections secured Smart's earliest commissions in this new and difficult environment.

[1] Lord Rothschild's family grew up and lived at Tring Park until the death of the dowager Lady Rothschild in 1935. The house was used by the NM Rothschild & Sons bank during World War II before being taken over by the Arts Educational School (re-named Tring Park School for the Performing Arts) in 1945.