THE LIMNER COMPANY



RICHARD CROSSE (1742 - 1810)

Portrait miniature of Oliver Cromwell (1599-1658) wearing armour and looking to the left

Circa: circa 1790

circa 1790

Watercolour on ivory (licence QHYNBW2H)

Oval, 76mm (3 /4in) high

Original turned wood frame

This portrait miniature of Oliver Cromwell provides an interesting study into the complex iconography of the Lord Protector and his legacy. Comparison with the searingly honest portraits produced from life by miniaturist Samuel Cooper (1607/8-1672), from which the term ‘warts and all’ derives[1], lays bare the idealisation of his image by the time the present miniature was painted in the late 18th century.

The miniature is likely a copy after Sir Peter Lely’s (1618-1680) painting, produced circa 1654 just after Cromwell’s inauguration as Lord Protector [Birmingham Museums Trust, accession no.1949P29]. This, in turn, is said to have been copied from Cooper’s head study in miniature circa 1653 [Collection of the Duke of Buccleuch and Queensberry] and his torso dressed in armour is thought to have been modelled of the work of Sir Anthony Van Dyck (1599-1641). Confusingly however, Cooper worked up larger, finished miniatures from the Buccleuch study, the prime example being that now in the collection at Compton Verney [CVCSC:0367.B]. This Lely / Cooper type became one of the definitive portraits of the Lord Protector and was much reproduced.

Support for Oliver Cromwell and the ‘Good Old Cause’ never entirely died away, but a discernible resurgence came in the 18th century and gathered momentum in the 19th century.[2] Miniaturist Christian Richter (1678-1732) made 5 copies after the Compton Verney miniature of 1657 (previously called the ‘Harcourt’ miniature), 4 of which date to 1708, and it’s been suggested they may have been painted to commemorate the 50th anniversary of Cromwell’s death. The early 18th-century miniaturist

Bernard Lens III (1682-1740) is known to have made 2 portraits after the Compton Verney miniature (see one previously sold by The Limner Company), and from 1801 the enamellist Henry Bone (1755-1834) is known to have produced copies of Cromwell's portrait as well.[3]

Richard Crosse was not known as a copyist, but this miniature is characteristic of his mature style towards the end of the 18th century. Between 1780-90, Crosse produced a number of miniatures on extraordinarily large ivories, which - like the present portrait – measure over 10cm; two fine examples on ivory and a large enamel can be found at the Victoria and Albert Museum depicting the actress Sarah Siddons (1755-1831) [P.146-1929], the artist's brother (on enamel) [P.148-1929], and a self-portrait [P.147-1929]. All three also have ebonised turned wood frames, as with Cromwell's miniature. As all four pictures date to the time Crosse was exhibiting at the Royal Academy[4], and depict either well-known figures or people close to the artist, it is possible to speculate that they may have been intended as exhibition pieces.

Whether Crosse was exploiting the renewed interest in Cromwell, or this miniature was painted for a commission, he produced an almost handsome image of the Lord Protector's infamously gnarly visage. Perhaps a demonstrating his skill for flattery to potential clients, or a romanticised portrayal for a Cromwell sympathiser, it's ironic that the result would have almost certainly been disapproved of by its puritanical subject.

[1] A conflation of Cromwell's instruction to the artist (now thought most likely to be Cooper) to "use all your skill to paint my picture truly like me. & not Flatter me at all, but (pointing to his own face) remark all these ruffness. pimples warts & every thing as you see me." See Rutherford, E., Grosvenor, B., Warts and All; The Portrait Miniatures of Samuel Cooper (1607/8-1672), catalogue of the exhibition held at Philip Mould & Co. 13 November – 7 December 2013, p.72

[2] See Mason, T. W. "Nineteenth-Century Cromwell." Past & Present, no. 40, 1968, pp. 187-191. JSTOR, http://www.jstor.org/stable/650076 Accessed 2 June 2026.

[3] See Bone's preparatory drawing now at the National Portrait Gallery, NPG D17603.

[4] Between 1770-96. See Foskett, F., British Portrait Miniatures; A History, 1968 (Hamlyn), p.130