THE LIMNER COMPANY



DUTCH SCHOOL (17th Century)

A rare portrait miniature depiction of a hand-fasting ceremony, with three figures standing in a room lined with books

Circa: circa 1675

circa 1675

Watercolour on vellum

Oval, 95 mm (3 ¾ in) high

Original tortoiseshell case with mirror interior, the case held with flaming heart lock

This fascinating scene, hidden in its original case with a mirror, shows a handfasting ceremony, with a woman binding the hand of the centre figure, a gentleman, to a lady standing to his side with a black ribbon. The scene is set in the same way as the interiors of the Dutch Golden Age oil paintings and can possibly be attributed to Gesina ter Borch (1631-1690) or her circle, who painted similar scenes, many of which are now in the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. Gesina was born into an artistic family and is often defined as an “amateur” artist. She never apprenticed professionally, never joined a guild, never showed her works publicly, and, as far as we know, never sold a work of art. Eclipsed by her more famous older brother, professional painter Gerard ter Borch II, Gesina ter Borch’s artwork never received interest outside of her immediate social circle during her lifetime or in the centuries following, until in the 19th century an album of her small watercolours was discovered (now in the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam). Often illustrating romantic poetry, Gesina ter Borch began working on this Materi-boeck, a collection of short texts and aphorisms in calligraphy, around the age of fourteen. The small figures already display Ter Borch’s eye for anecdotal detail. They perform household chores, engage in conversation or court each other.

Handfasting as a practice was a Germanic tradition derived from the Old Norse *handfesta*, meaning ‘to strike a bargain by joining hands’. In the Netherlands, handfasting was recognised not as a pagan ritual, but as a formal, legally binding betrothal or engagement contract. It acted to the official church or civil

marriage (the trouwen).

The original case, with its handcrafted silver hinge in the shape of a flaming heart, shows that this mirror would have a treasured possession, recording the marriage of the owner to be viewed only upon opening.