

THE LIMNER COMPANY



ROMAN SCHOOL (17th century)

Portrait of a Noblewoman, probably Maria Luisa Gabriella of Savoy (1688-1714), wearing a red dress with gold, lace-trimmed bodice, a pearl necklace and red headband

Circa: circa 1700

circa 1700

Oil on copper

Oval, 75 mm (2 9/10 in) high

In an elaborate Rococo silver frame decorated with flowers, possibly North Italian or Austrian, 18th century

This vibrant portrait of a young lady bears a facial resemblance to known portraits of Maria Luisa Gabriella of Savoy, the wife of Spanish King Philip V (1683-1746). This is especially true in her large forehead and distinctive lips. These could be mistaken for features of the 'Habsburg' face, though Maria was not a member of that family by birth. In 1700, just before this portrait is likely to have been painted, Charles II of Spain (1661-1700) died, leaving no heirs and a vacant Spanish throne. It was Maria's husband who eventually took his place, and it would therefore make sense for his wife to be painted emphasising facial features so associated with the long-standing Spanish monarchs.

If this is a portrait of Maria, it could be noted that she looks rather old for her age here. However, she was known for her maturity within the Spanish court. When she was married to Philip in 1701, she was only thirteen while he was seventeen. It is said that Philip was very enamoured with his young wife, and in return, she was credited for encouraging him in important political decisions during his reign.

Tragically, Maria died of tuberculosis at the age of 25.

Spain gave up control of its Italian territories in 1715, but when this portrait was painted, they controlled Naples and Sicily. It is therefore possible that a Roman artist could have been exposed to their court and been employed to paint a portrait of the Queen Consort. The curled pieces of hair framing the forehead of the sitter and stiff lace emerging from her bodice are both distinct features of women's fashion from the first decade of the 18th century, and therefore allow the portrait to be dated to that time. The same can be said about her red mantua, which has been decorated with gold embroidery to match her gold bodice. Because this portrait was painted in the medium of oil, the gold and red colours used by the unknown artist have remained bright; the paint used does not soak into the surface of the metal as it would with canvas or paper and therefore has not lost vibrancy, nor has it faded, even three centuries after it was first painted.

Just as striking as the colours of this portrait is the elaborate silver frame in which it is housed. A frame like this removes the miniature's purely intimate function and makes it a centrepiece, which could be displayed on a wall or within a cabinet. An extreme level of skill would have been required to create the silver floral decorations which surround the frame. Despite the weight of the silver, the flowers look delicate, and the movement provided by the silver stems with which they are attached adds another layer of drama to the portrait.