# THE LIMNER COMPANY



**RICHARD COSWAY (1742 - 1821)**

**Portrait miniature of a young Lady, wearing 'widow's weeds' with one breast exposed, her elbow resting on an urn**

Circa: circa 1790

circa 1790

*Watercolour on ivory (licence ERPF6T8V)*

Oval, 65 mm (2 1/2 in) high

Gold, enamel and seed pearl frame

The unusual dichotomy of a widow with one breast exposed is perhaps unexpected for the modern viewer of this portrait miniature by the society miniaturist Richard Cosway. Widows are generally depicted as modest and serene, not young and nubile. However, the meaning behind such a curious juxtaposition can be explained by popular images of the 18th century, such as *Le tendre ressouvenir* (tender memory) by Jean-Baptiste Greuze (1725-1805) [1], in which a young widow re-reads old letters before the bust of her deceased husband with her breast exposed in a loose gown.

This work by Greuze was exhibited at the Grand Salon du Louvre, Paris in 1763 and was extremely influential. He also depicted his wife as the model in the painting *The Inconsolable Widow*, which dates to circa 1785.[2] In this later study, Greuze also shows the young widow with black gauze barely covering her breast. Cosway, by the 1780s an established art collector, would have recognised Greuze's classical influences and included them in his own version shown here in the present work – the sitter's veil and urn citing ancient Roman dress and ceramics. Greuze and Cosway were frequently linked in the art market and in private collections, with auction records and dealers often pairing prints and drawings from both masters.

In depicting a widow mourning not only the loss of her husband in terms of financial security and status, Cosway was very much mirroring the sentiment of the later 18th century – when more emphasis was

placed on the emotional bond between husband and wife. These new social values in the third quarter of the 18th century were perhaps not present in Cosway's own marriage, which was certainly convenient to both parties, if not exactly a marriage of convenience.

[1] Now in the Wallace Collection, London.

[2] Sold Sotheby's, New York, 'Important Old Master Paintings And European Works Of Art', 25 January 2007, lot 362.