THE LIMNER COMPANY



Attributed to WILLIAM FAITHORNE (1616 - 1691)

Plumbago portrait of King Charles II (1630-1685), wearing a breastplate, embroidered sleeve, white lace jabot, and curled full-bottomed wig

Circa: circa 1675

circa 1675

Graphite on vellum (plumbago)

Oval, 62 mm (2 ½ in) high

Turned and gilded wood frame

This plumbago portrait is taken from the full-scale portrait by Peter Lely (1618-1680), of which there are numerous versions and copies, one of which can be found in the National Portrait Gallery, London (NPG 153). As the King's painter, Lely was responsible for a plethora of portraits of the King with different compositions. They are helpfully categorised in Katherine Mary Beatrice Gibson's 1997 PhD thesis[1], focused on the iconography of Charles II. She separates this specific composition from the other 'Third head study' by Lely, which does not contain the same embroidered sleeve. Despite being the King's painter for over 20 years, it is believed that Charles sat for him only three times, and from each sitting, Lely created one head study. By the time the third head study was painted, Charles was well-settled into his restored throne, and the exclusion crisis, which would define his later reign, had not yet broken out. Before the restoration, portrait miniatures had been a means through which Charles could spread his image to loyal followers. Though they did not quite hold the same political meaning in the 1670s, portraits like the present example still served as a reminder of who was King and were widely copied from the original works created by those lucky enough to paint *ad vivum*.

This specific plumbago is not listed in the thesis and must have remained within a private collection at the time it was published. It can be attributed to William Faithorne, an engraver and draughtsman who worked in both England and France. During the Civil War, he had fought alongside the Royalists with William Peake, the son of miniaturist Robert Peake, and was captured at the Siege of Basing House in 1645. From there, he was sent to France, where he may have trained with Robert Nantieul and Philip de Champaigne; the former's influence is evident in this portrait.

Plumbago portraits were a rather localised phenomenon produced largely in the late 16th to early 18th centuries. They originated in the Netherlands, with artists such as Heindrick Goltzius (1558-1617) and the de Passe family (Crispijn, ca.1594-1670 and Simon, ca.1595-1647). The term ‘plumbago’ is used to describe a small portrait, like the present example, produced with

a range of materials, all used on vellum usually laid on card, including graphite and indian ink. The popularity of this form dawned in England in the late 17th century. During this period, graphite was being mined in Borrowdale, Cumbria, meaning that it no longer had to be imported from the Continent.

Faithorne was one of the earliest artists working in this medium in England. He is often overshadowed by the well-known David Loggan (1634-1692), who moved to London in 1660. Faithorne’s works are relatively rare, though a few fine examples can be found in public collections, including his portrait of John Aubrey in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford (EDB123). His style is rather more dynamic than that of his contemporaries, and less focused on creating a clean distinction between background and sitter. As a result, textures are exaggerated, which has been adopted by the hand of this portrait in capturing the king’s hair. The result is a much more ‘continental’ appearance to his work.

[1] K. M. B. Gibson, '"Best Belov'd of Kings": The Iconogrpahy of King Charles II' (PhD thesis, Courtauld Institute, University of London, 1997).