THE LIMNER COMPANY



SAMUEL SHELLEY (1750/56 - 1808)

Portrait miniature of Theophila Palmer (1757 -1848), niece of Sir Joshua Reynolds, wearing white dress with lace bow and black shawl, pearls in her powdered hair

Circa: 1785

1785

Watercolour on ivory (licence V7JNAX2M)

Oval, 41 mm (1 5/8 in) high

Gold plated frame decorated with pale blue enamelled scrolls to the border

This delicate portrait by Shelley is a copy of Reynoldss' oil portrait of his niece Theophila Palmer, painted between 1776-1781 [recorded as in a private collection]. The original from which this work derives was started by Reynolds in 1776 and presented to Theophila on her marriage in 1781, and it is possible therefore, that Shelley was commissioned around the same time to produce smaller, more portable versions for dispersal amongst close friends and family.

It was quite common for artists, especially miniaturists, to copy the works of established painters on a reduced scale - Ozias Humphry, for example, also produced numerous portraits 'in little' after Reynolds as a method of expanding his client base. This portrait is also perhaps evidence of the close relationship between Reynolds and the younger Shelley, who had great ambitions both for his own career and for the medium of watercolour in general.

Shelley became a highly successful artist after studying at the R.A. schools (and exhibiting 1774-1804). He did not confine himself to miniature painting and worked in a number of mediums, becoming an important voice in the history of watercolour painting in the eighteenth century. A founder member of the first watercolour society in 1805, he believed that watercolours should be given their own forum and exhibition space in order to be properly appreciated. Before the formation of such a society, watercolours could only be shown next to oils at the conventional exhibition spaces of the Society of

Artists or Royal Academy. This new separation from brightly coloured, large oil paintings allowed watercolours to be viewed among paintings in the same media and heralded a new admiration of such work. Shelley's desire to compete with oil paintings also led him to produce ambitious, small watercolour subject pictures to exhibit alongside the portrait miniatures he painted all his life.

The sitter in this portrait, Theophila was the second daughter of Sir Joshua's sister Mary Reynolds (1716-94), who married John Palmer (1708-70) of Great Torrington, Devon, in 1740. Clearly Theophila felt more at home in London however, and from the age of thirteen lodged with her uncle, of whom she was 'enthusiastically and affectionately fond'. The feeling was clearly mutual, and when Reynolds died in 1792 he left his niece a staggering £10,000 fortune in his will. Earlier in 1781 Theophila married Robert Lovell Gwatkin (1757-1843) of Killiow, near Truro in Cornwall, eventually becoming a mother to three sons and seven daughters.