THE LIMNER COMPANY

SAMUEL SHELLEY (1750/56 - 1808)

Portrait miniature of a Gentleman in military-style dress, with blue jacket with a red collar, gold trim, and white facings, a white stock, and a powdered wig worn 'en queue'

Circa: circa 1780s

circa 1780s

Watercolour on ivory (licence WR2PUDNC)

Oval, 42 mm (1 ⅝ in) high

Signed verso ‘Shelley pinx. / [Henrietta] Street / Covent Garden’

The size and style of this miniature, which is more subdued and lifelike than many others painted by Shelley, points to it having been painted in the 1780s, rather early in his career. By this point he was exhibiting from Henrietta Street, Covent Garden, the address given on the reverse of the miniature. Though Shelley sometimes signed the front of miniatures, he more often signed on the reverse, or not at all.

Many of his miniatures, especially of women, are much ‘frillier’ than the present work and feature fluffy hair, rosy cheeks, and pale colouring. His portraits of male sitters are usually less exaggerated, and that is especially the case here. Though the unknown sitter is wearing what appears to be military uniform, it is likely that this is instead a general military-style outfit. As with wearing armour in portraits in previous centuries, wearing uniform worked as a status symbol without necessarily indicating any military experience.