

THE LIMNER COMPANY



JOHN SMART (1741 - 1811)

Portrait miniature of a Gentleman with pink powdered hair wearing a green coat, cream waistcoat and white ruff

Circa: 1776

1776

Watercolour on ivory (licence 9KNWHXCV)

Oval, 46 mm (1 ³/₄ in) high

Signed with initials 'J.S.' and dated 1776

Gold frame

This portrait miniature was painted in 1776, shortly before John Smart (1741-1811) was made Vice-President and then President of the Royal Society of Artists, in 1777 and 1778 respectively. Although the portrait was painted during Smart's time in London, there are notable similarities with works completed while he was living in India, particularly the pink powdered hair and the seemingly sun-kissed cheeks of the sitter, as well as the gold frame in which the portrait is housed.

While coloured powdered hair was not exclusively worn by Smart's sitters in India, the fashion seems to have been especially pronounced there.[1] One of many examples, a portrait miniature of Ann Chase (née Rand; 1759-1837) shows her wearing pink powder in her hair, and this work was painted by Smart in 1788 in Madras (now called Chennai).[2] This is made clear by Smart's inclusion of an 'I' underneath his initials and the date. As with others from India, her portrait shows her with pink cheeks and a slightly shiny nose to indicate the sun and heat encountered there. An officer of the East India Army sports a tan and some very light pink powder in his hair.[3] His skin glistening with sweat, it also seems he is quite affected by the heat.

Although the current miniature was not painted in India, it is possible that the sitter had connections or even spent time there himself. Smart had established ties to India as early as 1776 when he painted a portrait miniature of Miss Mary Lewin to be sent to her brother there. Mary's future husband attended the sitting with her and wrote:

"I went to London/ with Miss Lewin, (set her down at Mr Smart's, a/ limner in Berner's Street, Oxford Street, who/ is taking her Picture in Miniature, to be sent/ to her Bro. Thomas at Ft. St. George in the East India)".[4]

When Smart arrived in Madras on 6 September 1785, he actually set up shop in Fort St George.

The frame in which the present miniature is set looks particularly similar to the "Colonial" frames used by Smart when he was in Madras. Thin bands of engraving surround the miniature on the front, while the reverse often carries further engraved outlines around a central oval which contains hairwork or opalescent glass with gold initials. Smart relied on jewellers in Fort St George, Black Town, and Maharatta Town to provide such frames for miniatures painted in India.[5] One example of these frames accompanies the aforementioned portrait of Ann Chase. There are also several others in the catalogue for the exhibition *John Smart: A Genius Magnified* hosted by Philip Mould & Company.[6]

Again, whilst the current miniature may not have been painted in India, it is possible that the sitter or owner, who likely had connections of their own to India, later took it or sent it to Madras, where it was framed or reframed in this style.

[1] Aimee Marcereau DeGalan, "Pretty in Pink: John Smart's Penchant (or not) for Pink Hair," essay in Aimee Marcereau DeGalan, Blythe Sobol, and Maggie Keenan, *The Starr Collection of Portrait Miniatures, 1500–1850: The Collections of the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art*, vol. 4, ed. Aimee Marcereau DeGalan (Kansas City, MO: Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, 2025), <https://doi.org/10.37764/8322.6.94>.

[2] John Smart (1741-1811), Ann Chase (née Rand) (1759-1837), wearing pale pink dress, frilled lace collar and pale pink ribbons, her hair powdered, 1788. For sale with Philip Mould & Company. <https://philipmould.com/artworks/categories/20/5637-john-smart-ann-chase-nee-rand-1759-1837-wearing-pale-pink-1788/>

[3] John Smart (1741-1811), Portrait miniature of an Officer, probably Alexander Dyce (1758-1835), in the East India Army uniform, 1790. Sold by The Limner Company. <https://www.portraitminiature.com/artwork-details/875813/0/john-smart-1742-1811-portrait-miniature>.

[4] An extract from the diary of her future husband Ralph Jackson, quoted in *Important Gold Boxes*,

Objects of Vertu and Portrait Miniatures, Christies, 25 May 2004.

[5] Emma Rutherford and Lawrence Hendra, *John Smart, A Genius Magnified*, Philip Mould and Company, 2014, 64.

[6] *Ibid*, cats 24, 27, and 28.