THE LIMNER COMPANY



ENGLISH SCHOOL (19th century)

Portrait miniature of a Subaltern of the Corps of Royal Engineers, in full dress, with scarlet coatee with garter blue velvet facings decorated with gold lace loops

Circa: circa 1813-1828

circa 1813-1828

Watercolour on ivory (licence 92P7YNMZ)

Oval, 87 mm (3 ⅜ in) high

Papier-mâché frame

The ‘full dress’ uniform worn by this subaltern allows him to be dated specifically to 1813-1828. It is difficult to narrow this period down further, as hairstyles remained relatively similar during this period. It is possible that he was painted earlier in this period, as his sideburns are relatively thin- this specific feature of facial hair is known to have grown- quite literally- in the early half of the nineteenth century.

Following the introduction of a tax on powder and more general changes in fashion at the turn of the nineteenth century, fewer gentlemen wore wigs, which had in previous years been synonymous with military uniform. Furthermore, in 1808, pigtails and queues were banned within the army. Instead, men donned their natural hair, like that worn by the unknown gentleman in this portrait, and this was usually styled loosely. Historically, and because of the period in which they were popular, these hairstyles became associated with the men in Austen’s novels, and romantics like Lord Byron.

The Corps of Royal Engineers was initially established as the Corps of Engineers in 1716, and they were given their royal prefix in 1787. They are colloquially known as the ‘sappers’. Their main function was, and remains, engineering and technical support to the British Army. To be part of the engineers was to be part of a socially exclusive sect of the army, and the title came with a high level of respect for the technical skills required to provide necessary support. Roles included map making and bridge building, but officers were also involved in direct conflict when this was needed. At the end of the

eighteenth century, they had been involved in the American War of Independence (1775-83), and in the nineteenth century, they had been involved in the Napoleonic Wars (1793-1815).