THE LIMNER COMPANY



ENGLISH SCHOOL (17th century)

Portrait oil of a Lady, likely to be an English or Swedish Noblewoman, with nineteen (19) [1]Costume 'mica' talcs

Circa: 17th century

17th century

The portrait oil on copper; the costume overlays painted on 'mica' talcs; the whole with original leather box with clasp

The miniature oval, 8cm high, the talcs approximately the same, dependent on wear.

[1] The costumes painted on the talcs can be described as follows:

A. An 'Ottoman' costume with ermine cloak and turban (only half of this overlay remains).

B. A pink cloak with ermine trim and pink ribbon accessories.

C. A red cloak with an ermine trim and red ribbon accessories.

D. A white veil or headdress, with pearl earrings decorated with pink ribbons.

E. Another 'Ottoman' costume with a red cloak and hat, both with ermine trim, and a gold undershirt.

F. A gentleman's costume, with black hat, black shirt slashed to reveal white undershirt, long, black curling hair and black facial hair.

G. A traditional Dutch headdress, called a 'huik', with pearl earrings and a ribbon.

H. A white wimple with white and black dress underneath.

I. A gentleman's costume with red cloak, black hat, and black facial hair.

J. A yellow dress with lace edging, red cloak, and pearl earrings.

K. A black hat with white and pink feathers, pearl earrings with pink ribbon and a pink ribbon at the breast.

L. A black wimple, possibly a nun's habit.

M. A masquerade costume, with a feathered headpiece, black mask, and other accessories.

N. A black cloak with leaves, possibly laurel leaves, used as a headpiece.

O. A gentleman's outfit, with black hooded cloak, white undershirt, and black facial hair.

P. A lace-trimmed dress with pink ribbon accessories.

Q. A pink dress with white sleeves and pink ribbon accessories.

R. A white headdress with pink ribbon.

S. A black hooded cloak, with pink ribboned accessories beneath.

Seventeenth-century 'mica' talc overlay and portrait sets are unique and extremely delicate objects. This example is remarkably similar to both a set sold by The Limner Company and one in the collection of the National Museum, Stockholm (NMGrh 3019). It is possible that all three were produced within the same studio, as there are repeats of certain overlays, and the portraits of women are almost identical. Northern Europe, Scandinavia, and England all appear to be centres of production for these 'dress-up' sets. None are attributed to a certain artist, though the examples from across these countries appear to have similar influences. Perhaps one connected artist travelled across these countries, establishing studios in them all.

Other examples of these sets depict Charles I as a Martyr, and his Queen Henrietta Maria, and have a direct political message behind them. Others have a portrait of Queen Christina of Sweden, who is famously known to have dressed up as a man to escape Sweden upon her abdication. Though the present work, and two similar examples, do not resemble Queen Christina enough to be said to be of her, it is possible that the story of Queen Christina's escape may have inspired the use and production of these sets as a precursor to the parlour game.

There is also evidence of these portraits having been produced to show prospective husbands what their wives may have looked like in different costumes. Given the inclusion of gentlemen's costumes in this set, it is unlikely to have been produced for this purpose. This particular example has three gentlemen's costumes, and many others could have also been worn as some sort of disguise, indicating that, if the sitter is not simply generic, dressing up as certain characters must have been an important part of her tale.

Each set varies in the number of costumes that still survive. This example has an extraordinary number of mica overlays still, which have survived centuries of use, or 'play', despite their extremely fragile medium. The condition of the overlays and of the miniature itself has been aided by the original leather box. They can still be used as originally intended, and represent an intriguing insight into one of the functions of portrait miniatures in the seventeenth century.