NICHOLAS FRESEE (British, 1762–after 1824)

Portrait of a Man
c. 1795–1800
Watercolor on ivory; oval, 7.6 x 6.5 cm (3 x 2½ in.)
Signature: none
Setting: gilt metal frame with glazed hair reverse
Gift of J. H. Wade Jr., G. G. Wade and Mrs. E. B. Greene, 1926.229

LITTLE BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION is available about Nicholas Freese, who is often referred to as N Freese. He exhibited regularly at the Royal Academy from 1794 to 1814. Royal Academy records identify him as a “painter” rather than a “miniature painter” and note his occupation of a succession of three addresses on the Strand (86, 411, and 113).¹ A miniature sold at Bonhams, Knightsbridge, in 2010 indicates that the artist may also have worked in Bath around 1799.² In addition to portraits, Freese exhibited landscapes and one subject picture, Salmacis and Hermaphrodit us in 1809 (no. 700).³ Among the hallmarks of Freese’s style are almond-shaped eyes, bow lips, and crosshatching, especially pronounced.

¹ An 1814 marriage notice of his daughter Mary Kemble (née Freese) refers to her father as “Mr. N. Freese, miniature painter, London.” The New Monthly Magazine, 1 March 1814, p. 196.
² Portrait of The Hon. Mary Ann Adams (née Cockayne). N. Freese. Gilt-metal frame with silver-mounted paste border; h. 8.7 cm (3¼ in.). From Fine Portrait Miniatures (Knightsbridge, London: Bonhams, 8 April 2010), lot 94. According to the entry, the work was painted in Bath in 1799.
around the oval border of the backgrounds of the miniatures. On the rare occasions when his work is signed, N. Freese appears on the front, or a label on the back gives his name and address.

An artist known as J Freese, who was painter to the Duke of Cambridge and exhibited one picture at the Royal Academy in 1811, may have been a relation but could not have been a son as is sometimes suggested; the artist’s only son was a soldier named George Fraser Freese. In parish registers, records indicate slight variations of the uncommon surname: a Nicholas Freeze, son of Nicholas and Elizabeth, was christened on 23 June 1762, at Saint Martin’s, Birmingham, and a Nicholas Freese is recorded as marrying Mary Stokes at St. Martin-in-the-Fields on 29 August 1791. Furthermore, an N Freese, whose profession is given as artist, is documented in London at No. 9 Percy Street in April 1824. Together, this evidence suggests that the artist usually known as N Freese (active 1794–1814) was born in Birmingham and by 1791 had moved to London, where he lived and worked as an artist at least until 1824.

The unknown gentleman in this portrait is painted bust length in three-quarter view and facing right. He wears a blue coat with gold buttons over a white waistcoat and frilled cravat. His eyes are brown, and his powdered hair is worn en queue. There is a slightly yellow pallor to his complexion, and his nose is aquiline. The background is pale gray with a hint of green, executed with crosshatching, particularly near the edges. Freese combined watercolor with gouache, as is visible in the opaque white edges of the frilled cravat. He painted the hair using a technique in which watercolor pigment was applied then lifted away with a brush, creating channels suggesting thick, soft tendrils (fig. 1). The sitter’s bland, pleasant expression is not particularly individualized. His powdered hair and costume—similar

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5 Lieut. George Fraser Freese was killed as a young man during the Peninsular War in the battle of Vitoria, and his father exhibited his portrait in his last Royal Academy exhibition of 1814. Obituaries, The European Magazine and London Review, October 1813, p. 371.
to those seen in the Cleveland Museum of Art’s *Portrait of a Man* by George Engleheart (1752–1829)—indicate that this miniature was executed around 1795–1800, when powdered hair was becoming increasingly unfashionable (fig. 2).

The miniature is framed in a gilt metal locket. The back contains a lock of hair arranged as a wheat sheaf cinched with a gold ribbon, over (now cracked) white opalescent glass on pressed foil, within a decorative border of cut gold (fig. 3). The wheat sheaf was popular in jewelry and often incorporated into the settings of Georgian miniatures. Its mourning symbolism derived from ecclesiastical interpretations of wheat as the basic element of bread, a Eucharistic metaphor for the body of Christ but also a crop that would be reaped at harvest time. Though frequently seen in mourning jewelry, the wheat sheaf could also suggest fertility and was an appropriate emblem for a wedding gift. The ease of fashioning a lock of hair into a wheat sheaf as a simple form of decorative hairwork helped ensure its regular appearance through the nineteenth century. The wheat sheaf of hair also appears in a miniature dated about 1796 by the French artist Charles de Chatillon (1777–1844), also in the CMA; there, it is worn by a gentleman as a pin (fig. 4). Cory Korkow