ANDREW PLIMER (British, 1763–1837)

Portrait of a Woman
late 1790s
Watercolor on ivory; oval, 8.5 x 7.2 cm (3 3/8 x 2 7/8 in.)
Signature: none
Setting: gold frame with glazed reverse
The Edward B. Greene Collection, 1941.561

Provenance
Before 1927
Leopold C. Davis (London).
1927
Purchased by Edward B. Greene (1878–1957, Cleveland) for £200 ($1,000) on September 28; gift to the Cleveland Museum of Art, December 5, 1941.
1941
The Cleveland Museum of Art.

Exhibitions
None.

Bibliography

THIS UNKNOWN SITTER has greenish-gray eyes and curly brown hair falling to the back of her neck. She wears a white lace-bordered mob cap with a bow at the top and ruffle under the chin. Her brown dress of dotted Swiss cotton has a narrow white collar. Hand-woven during this period, dotted Swiss was a delicate fabric used for summer dresses. Both the Swiss dot gown and the mob cap give the sitter a casual, country air at odds with the approaching vogue for dressing in a style more classically inspired.¹ The background sky is light blue and gray, with crosshatching increasingly worked close to the figure. The color palette is confined to browns and muddy blues. This miniature, painted close to 1800, is a charming example of Andrew Plimer’s doll aesthetic, seen in the sitter’s round face, tiny mouth, and large eyes. Plimer was an extremely prolific artist, which helps to account for the fact that many of his female sitters look alike. Note, for instance, the stylistic similarities between this miniature and the portrait of Caroline Ellis sold at Christie’s, London, in 2008.

(fig. 1). In addition to expected similarities of dress, both sitters possess a long nose, large smoky eyes, and the slightly melancholy expression frequently seen in works by Plimer. This plaintive quality is distinct from the complacent and amused expressions so often observed in Richard Cosway (1742–1821) and John Smart (1741–1811) sitters, respectively.

Printed on a sticker attached to the top back of the frame is “Countess Orford. / A. Plimer.” This identification was applied to the miniature before it entered the museum’s collection in 1941. The sitter cannot, however, be the Countess Orford since Horace Walpole, the Earl of Orford, died without issue in 1797. Because he was unmarried, the title expired at his death.