THE ARTIST "V" (British, fl. 1770–1797)

Portrait of a Woman

c. 1775

Watercolor on ivory; oval, 5.5 x 3.7 cm (2⅛ x 1½ in.)

Signature: none

Setting: gold pendant frame

L. E. Holden Fund, 2011.39

Provenance

Before 2008
Nicky Gould (London).

c. 2008
Acquired by Elle Shushan (Philadelphia).

2011
The Cleveland Museum of Art.

Exhibitions

None.

Bibliography

None.

THIS PORTRAIT WAS PAINTED by the artist known only by the initial *V*, who has yet to be identified and whose body of work is not well defined. Miniatures by V have appeared in only a handful of public collections and exhibitions, including the Holburne Museum of Art in Bath (fig. 1).[1] The artist was recognized by 1929 when Basil Long mentioned two works by V that sold at auction in 1926 and 1928, both signed "V" and one dating from around 1778.[2] Since then, miniatures signed by or attributed to V have appeared regularly at auction.

The artist's work is distinctive and characterized by unnaturally large heads and a semi-grisaille technique at odds with the prevailing tendency of miniatures to utilize the creamy translucency of the ivory ground as a base for warm, glowing flesh tones.[3] Because miniaturists

1 Ann Summer and Richard Walker, *Secret Passion to Noble Fashion: The World of the Portrait Miniature* (Bath, England: Holburne Museum of Art, 1999), pp. 118–19.
2 Basil Long, *British Miniaturists Working Between 1520 and 1860* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1929), p. 445.
3 Daphne Foskett, *Miniatures: Dictionary and Guide* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Antique Collectors' Club, 1987; repr., 2000), p. 667, illus. p. 346, pl. 100A.

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Figure 1. *Portrait of a Man in a Dark Blue Coat,* c. 1780. The artist signed "V." Watercolor on ivory; 6.1 x 5 cm (2⅜ x 2 in.). Private collection, England.

Figure 2. *Portrait of Isaac Spooner and His Wife Barbara,* 1791. The artist signed "V." Watercolor on ivory; h. 5.7 cm (2¼ in.). From *Fine Portrait Miniatures* (London: Christie's, 28 May 2002), lot 36. Current location unknown.

Figure 3. *Portrait of a Lady Wearing a Pale Yellow Riding Jacket.* The artist signed "V." Watercolor on ivory; h. 3.5 cm (1⅜ in.). From *Fine Portrait Miniatures* (New Bond Street, London: Bonhams, 22 November 2006), lot 70. Current location unknown.

Figure 4. *Portrait of a Girl Wearing a White Dress,* 1797. The artist signed "V." Watercolor on ivory; h. 7 cm (2¾ in.). From *Fine Portrait Miniatures* (New Bond Street, London: Bonhams, 22 November 2006), lot 89. Current location unknown.

often came to the art form from a variety of artistic traditions, it remains a distinct possibility that V was primarily a draftsman or printmaker who worked in the medium only occasionally. Although some works by V exhibit a saturated color palette and strong linearity (figs. 1, 2), others more closely resemble the Cleveland Museum of Art miniature, with its pale colors and soft, voluminous forms (figs. 3, 4).

This bust-length portrait depicts an unknown woman before a plain, greenish brown background. She wears a purple gown trimmed in white along her décolletage, and her full, dark hair is swept back and piled high. The artist rendered the sitter in three-quarter profile, gazing slightly down and out of the picture plane to the right. V used a grisaille technique for the sitter's face, hair, and body, leaving the purple of the dress as the only vivid color in the composition. The miniature is housed in a gold locket with three Chinese marks on

Figure 5. Chinese marks on reverse of gold case (detail).

the back (fig. 5). The mark at the upper right indicates that the case is made of "genuine gold";[4] the Chinese characters comprising the other two marks are illegible. Miniatures often functioned as mementos for loved ones, so the Chinese case—probably not original to the object—may have been rehoused by the recipient of the portrait while he or she traveled in East Asia.

The work is a striking and unusual likeness. Its uncompromising frankness and unexpected manner of painting demonstrate a unique and significant voice in late-eighteenth-century British portraiture, as the artist was willing to move away from the conventions of miniature painting. In contrast to the style of portrait-miniature painting dominated during this period by Richard Cosway (1742–1821), Andrew Plimer (1763-1837), and George Engleheart (1752–1829), the artist V presents a note of startling naturalism. CORY KORKOW

4 Thanks to Anita Chung, PhD, curator of Chinese art at the Cleveland Museum of Art, for this identification.