The Determined Widow Mrs Croad and her only Daughter

John Downman

Sold



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Description

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John Downman, A.R.A. (1750-1824)
The Determined Widow Mrs Croad and her only Daughter

Full-length, the coast near Plymouth and the sea beyond
Signed lower right: Jo Downman/1806
Watercolour over pencil, coloured chalks and stump heightened with bodycolour
88.2 by 65.9 cm., 34 ¾ by 26 in.

This fine and imposing neo-classical portrait is an important rediscovery and addition to knowledge of Downman's portrait work; the survival of the period carved Maratta frame in excellent condition makes it even more remarkable. The portrait, which dates from 1806, shows Mrs Ann Croad, née Chappell (1777-1837) and her daughter in a draped arbour with a landscape beyond them to the left. In 1798 Ann Chappell married John Croad, a prosperous Plymouth builder but was widowed fourteen months later. She was known as the `Determined Widow' due to her resolution to continue her husband's business after his death. Behind the sitters and to the right is a funerary urn draped in flowers with a Greek inscription reading "ouket ' esti" ("he is no more"), an obvious reference to her deceased husband and giving additional meaning to the sumptuous mourning dress and prominently displayed wedding ring. The words give an air of classical refinement to the picture and are taken from Euripides' tragedy Orestes (line 1081); certainly no direct reference to the content of the play with its theme of the consequences of matricide is intended. The funerary urn is placed on an athiénienne, a small decorative stand in the form of an antique tripod which was popularised in France in the late eighteenth century. The coastline behind the sitters represents Plymouth, possibly with Staddon Heights or Wembury Point across the Sound on the left.

As Jane Munro wrote in her exhibition catalogue (John Downman 1750-1824, Landscape, figure studies and portraits of 'Distinguished persons', Fitzwilliam Museum, 1996), "By the end of the 1780s, although Downman continued to receive regular commissions for his portraits, his critical popularity was flagging. … one critic of 1789 put it 'Downman's heads have their usual delicacy and their usual sameness. He has but two passable faces, one face for ladies and another for gentlemen, & one or other of these prototypes all his likenesses are brought to resemble' … Presumably in response to these signs of critical disfavour, Downman changed his style from around the middle of the 1790s, to produce portrait drawings which were larger in scale, bolder in execution, and more penetrating in their description of personality." (p. 16). This is an excellent example of this new style and approach at the end of Downman's long and prolific career. "After c. 1800, Downman's career was itinerant. Although he maintained an address in London, and continued to send works to the annual exhibitions at the Royal Academy and British Institution, he travelled extensively throughout England, no doubt accompanied by the reputation which he had gained in the capital. He appears to have spent much of the period from 1804 to 1806 in West Malling, Kent … and subsequently moved to Exeter, for the brief year of his marriage" (op. cit., p. 17...

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