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Portrait Of A Lady With Long Hair, White Dress With Red Bows C.1620-1630 Oil On Canvas Painting



10 150 EUR

Signature : Entourage de Cornelius Johnson (1593-1661)

Period : 17th century

Condition : Très bon état

Material : Oil painting

Width : 85

Height : 96

Depth : 6

Description

There is something unusually intimate about this beautiful portrait of a young woman. Painted around 400 years ago, her richly ornamented white dress, delicate lace, rose-red ribbons and luminous pearls proclaim the refinement of early Stuart society, yet it is the more personal details that make her memorable. She meets the viewer with a quiet directness that transcends the formality of much seventeenth-century portraiture. Dating most plausibly to the 1620s and closely associated with the artistic world of Cornelius Johnson, the painting preserves an engaging likeness of a young woman at a moment when dress, jewellery and portraiture played an important part in expressing family identity, social standing and personal aspiration. The sitter is shown bust-length against a dark background,

Dealer

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her pale complexion and softly modelled features illuminated by the contrast with her abundant brown hair. The white of her costume is relieved by intricate lace, warm gold-coloured ornament, and vivid red bows. She wears a string of pearls, and just above it runs a slender black thread, apparently an independent item of jewellery. The painter has paid particular attention to the sitter's hair, allowing it to fall freely rather than confining it within an elaborate headdress. A narrow plait descends over her right shoulder, an arresting detail which introduces a note of informality into an otherwise carefully composed image. The surrounding feigned oval gives the portrait the appearance of a likeness set within an architectural or marble frame, an elegant pictorial device strongly associated with early Stuart portraiture. The costume offers important evidence for dating the painting. During the first decades of the seventeenth century, English women's fashions moved gradually away from the rigidly structured garments and elaborate standing ruffs of the late Elizabethan and early Jacobean periods towards softer necklines, falling lace and increasingly expansive sleeves. The transformation was neither immediate nor uniform, and elements of older and newer fashions frequently appeared together. The present sitter's comparatively restrained silhouette, richly ornamented white dress and open, lace-edged neckline seem particularly characteristic of this transitional moment. Her costume lacks the emphatically broad, flowing appearance familiar from many portraits of the later 1630s, while its softer presentation distinguishes it from the more formal styles of the preceding generation. The fine black thread around her neck is especially intriguing. Such cords were a recognisable fashion in England during the early Stuart period and appear in portraits from approximately 1610 into the 1630s. Sometimes they supported rings or small jewels; on other occasions they were worn without an obvious pendant. Their purpose was not

exclusively practical. As Rachel Church of the Victoria and Albert Museum has observed, the contrast between a dark thread and pale skin may itself have been part of their appeal. In the present portrait, the cord appears to be worn in conjunction with a pearl necklace, a combination encountered in early seventeenth-century female portraiture. The effect is at once fashionable and remarkably delicate. Although the thread cannot independently establish a precise date, its presence strengthens the painting's association with the first three decades of Stuart England. Equally revealing is the sitter's hairstyle. The long, loosely arranged hair and narrow plait differ considerably from the carefully dressed curls and more elaborate arrangements familiar in many portraits of the later Caroline court. Flowing hair had longstanding associations with youth and maidenhood, although it could also be adopted as a consciously idealised mode of presentation. It would therefore be unwise to conclude that the sitter was unmarried solely on this evidence. Nevertheless, the combination of her apparent youth, unbound hair and carefully selected ornaments raises the possibility that the portrait was commissioned at an important moment in her early adult life, perhaps in anticipation of marriage, upon entering a new social circle, or simply to preserve her likeness for her family. Particularly compelling comparisons occur in the early work of Cornelius Johnson. His portrait tentatively identified as Lady Judith Corbet, née Osten, signed and dated 1619, incorporates elaborate lace, a black thread necklace, coloured ribbon ornaments and a feigned oval, demonstrating that several of the present painting's decorative features were already fashionable by the end of the 1610s. More closely comparable in overall presentation is Johnson's signed and dated portrait of 'A Lady of the Chetwynd Family, possibly Mary Chetwynd', painted in 1623. There the sitter appears with long, freely flowing hair, a low lace collar, richly decorated costume and a fine black

cord descending towards a small ornament. The painting is likewise enclosed within a feigned oval. The present sitter's pearls, black thread and costume are equally eloquent about her period and social environment. A further useful comparison is Johnson's 'An Unknown Noblewoman', signed and dated 1624. That portrait similarly combines a pale costume with red embroidered rosettes and a feigned marble oval. Taken together, the dated works of 1619, 1623 and 1624 demonstrate how naturally the present painting fits within the visual culture of Johnson's early English career. They lend particular support to a date in the 1620s, while allowing for the persistence of individual fashions into the following decade. Although the young woman's name has been lost, her portrait offers clues to the world she inhabited. The expense and refinement suggested by her costume and jewellery make an association with a prosperous household plausible, whether that of the landed gentry, a professional family, wealthy merchants or the wider aristocratic milieu. It would be tempting to place her in one of the great country houses whose family galleries preserve so many early Stuart portraits. Such a residence cannot presently be named, but the circumstances in which a portrait of this scale might have been commissioned are reasonably clear. A painted likeness was both a personal possession and an instrument of family memory. It could commemorate a marriage, celebrate a daughter's coming of age, accompany negotiations between families, or preserve the appearance of someone whose life might subsequently carry her far from her childhood home. For a young woman of comfortable means in the 1620s, marriage could involve considerably more than a change of surname. It might bring responsibility for the management of a substantial household, the supervision of servants, participation in the administration of family property and the cultivation of relationships extending across counties and generations. Letters, visits, religious

observance, charitable obligations and the exchange of gifts helped sustain these networks. Women could be active participants in the preservation and advancement of family interests, even when the surviving historical record gives greater prominence to their fathers, husbands and sons. The portrait may have been intended for precisely such a network: an image through which relatives, prospective connections and later descendants would recognise and remember its sitter. The historical moment in which she lived was one of striking contrasts. England under James I enjoyed a flourishing culture of courtly display, elaborate dress and increasingly sophisticated portraiture, yet the kingdom was also deeply affected by religious divisions and events on the European continent. The defeat of Frederick V and Elizabeth Stuart, the so-called Winter King and Queen of Bohemia, in 1620 brought the Thirty Years' War into the immediate consciousness of the English court. Elizabeth, daughter of James I, remained a celebrated figure whose fashions and image circulated well beyond her exiled household. In 1625, the accession of Charles I and his marriage to the French princess Henrietta Maria introduced further continental influences into English court culture. The sitter's carefully chosen appearance belongs to this world of international fashions, dynastic alliances and increasingly refined social display, even though there is no evidence that she herself attended court. It was also a period in which portraiture had become indispensable to the visual culture of the English elite. Portraits were commissioned not only by royalty and hereditary aristocrats but also by prosperous merchants, lawyers, officeholders and provincial families. They recorded personal likenesses while affirming status, kinship and continuity. In an age before photography, such images carried an emotional significance that is sometimes obscured by their ceremonial presentation. A young woman's portrait might remain in the possession of her parents after her marriage, accompany her into a new household,

or eventually pass to children and grandchildren. Its function was therefore not merely decorative: it was a tangible expression of identity and belonging. Cornelius Johnson occupied an important position within this expanding market. Born in London in 1593 to a family of continental Protestant origin, he probably received much of his artistic training in the Netherlands before establishing himself as a portrait painter in England around 1618-19. Working in London, notably in the Blackfriars district, he developed a distinguished clientele among the gentry, merchants, professional classes and aristocracy. His portraits are admired for their disciplined compositions, sensitive modelling and exceptionally attentive rendering of costume, lace and jewellery. Johnson was among the first British-born portrait painters to sign and date his works consistently, providing an unusually valuable chronological record of his artistic development. His success culminated in his appointment in 1632 as a painter to Charles I, although the arrival of Anthony van Dyck that year transformed the competitive landscape of English court portraiture. Following the outbreak of the Civil War, Johnson left England for the Netherlands in 1643, continuing his career in Middelburg, Amsterdam and Utrecht, where he died in 1661. What distinguishes this portrait is the unusually engaging balance between social display and individual character. The pearls, lace, red ribbons and gold-coloured ornament evoke the cultivated elegance of early Stuart England, while the black thread and carefully plaited strand of hair preserve details of a fashion now almost entirely vanished. Above all, the young woman's direct gaze allows her to emerge from the conventions of her age as an individual rather than simply an example of period costume. Four centuries after it was painted, the portrait remains a compelling encounter with a life whose name has been lost but whose presence has not. Measurements: Height 96cm, Width 85cm framed (Height 37.75", Width 33.5" framed).

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