

# Daniel Katz Gallery

ANTIQUITY TO THE TWENTIETH CENTURY



**Sir Thomas Lawrence (Bristol 1769 - London 1830)**

**Richard Payne Knight**

Circa: c.1790

c.1790

oil on canvas

76.2 x 63.5 cm (30 x 25 inches)

Hitherto unpublished, this canvas is the earliest of three portraits Thomas Lawrence painted of Richard Payne Knight, one of the leading connoisseurs, collectors and scholars of his generation. The canvas, which is in a remarkably original state of preservation, can be dated on stylistic grounds to circa 1790 when the artist was approximately 21 years old, the period in which Lawrence was emerging as the natural successor to Sir Joshua Reynolds, then the pre-eminent portraitist in England.

When Lawrence and his sitter first encountered one another remains unclear, however, by 1788, the artist had begun *Homer Reciting his Poems* (1790; London, Tate Britain), the picture his biographer describes as 'painted for Mr. Richard Payne Knight... with great care and study' that was eventually exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1791 (D.E. Williams, *The Life and Correspondence of Sir Thomas Lawrence*, Kt. 1831, I, pp. 122-3). The Tate composition is considered Lawrence's visual crystallisation of Payne Knight's theories on painting, ideas which had been first ventilated in letters of 1776 and 1783 to the artists George Romney and James Barry, in which he reveals his position on the practice of contemporary art in Britain. The central tenets of Knight's doctrine were the importance of studying nature, that the human body should be painted from life, and that sublimity in history painting - the highest genre according to academic tradition - should be achieved on a small scale.

It is likely that Knight subsequently played a role in Lawrence succeeding Reynolds as Painter to the Society of Dilettanti following the latter's death in 1792. Two years later, Lawrence exhibited at the Royal Academy the three-quarter-length portrait of Knight now in the Whitworth Art Gallery, University of Manchester, a work described by Michael Levey as 'memorable though hardly flattering' (Sir Thomas Lawrence, New Haven and London, 2005, p. 104). Consciously following the pattern of earlier portraits of connoisseurs, Knight is shown seated with a large folio, beside one of the prized works from his collection; although its antiquity is now doubted by scholars, the vessel on the right of the composition with its prominent handles was famously described by Knight as worthy 'of the time of the Macedonian kings'. By the time Knight sat to the artist for a third portrait in 1805 - a bust-length for the Society of Dilettanti - Lawrence's admiration for his sitter had somewhat cooled. In a letter to Farington in August of that year, he remarks that Knight's taste should not be adopted and warned that it was 'founded on Sensual feeling' (Farington Diary, 24 August 1805, p. 2606). A copy of the Dilettanti portrait by Margaret Sarah Carpenter was gifted by the artist to the British Museum in 1852.

Having travelled widely in Italy during his youth, when he befriended the celebrated archaeologist and diplomat William Hamilton, Knight became, upon his return to England, a keen Classics scholar and a leading authority on ancient art, although his reputation was tarnished towards the end of his life by his vociferous criticism of the Elgin marbles. In 1786, he published his notorious Discourse on the Worship of Priapus, in which he sought to recover the importance of ancient phallic cults. Knight's most influential book, An Analytical Inquiry into the Principles of Taste, was published in 1805. He served as a prominent member of the Society of Dilettanti and was a keen collector. On his death in 1824, he bequeathed to the British Museum a magnificent collection of antique coins, medals and bronzes, and a vast ensemble of 1,144 Old Master drawings, which transformed the museum's holdings. Less well-known was the heterogeneous group of paintings he amassed at his estate of Downton, Shropshire, which included works of remarkable quality and variety, notably Rembrandt's late masterpiece of Saint Bartholomew (1661; Los Angeles, J. Paul Getty Museum), Mantegna's Adoration of the Shepherds and Claude's View of La Crescenza (c.1450 and 1648-50 respectively; both in New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art). Knight was a leading exponent of the Picturesque movement in country house architecture and landscaping. Following picturesque principles, at Downton he oversaw the construction in 1773-4 of a castle with an asymmetrical plan. His design of surrounding gardens was inspired by the work of Claude, Gaspard Dughet and the great Dutch masters Meindert Hobbema and Jacob van Ruisdael.

The portrait compares stylistically with a number of portraits from the start of the 1790s, including that of the Scottish physician and author Dr. John Moore (c.1790; Edinburgh, Scottish National Portrait Gallery) and William Lock of Norbury (1790; Boston, Museum of Fine Arts), a work thought to have been executed in a single sitting and displaying the young artist's precocious ability to capture a likeness at disarming speed. It was in 1790 that the artist exhibited his celebrated full-lengths of Queen Charlotte (1789; London, National Gallery) and Elizabeth Farren (1790; New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art), two outstanding masterpieces that signalled that Lawrence had 'unmistakably and permanently 'arrived'' (M. Levey, op. cit., 2005, p. 92).

### **Provenance**

Sir George Elliot Meyrick Tapps Gervis Meyrick, 3rd Bt. (1827-1896), Hinton Admiral, Hampshire, and Bodorgan Hall, Anglesey, by whom loaned, according to an inscription on the stretcher, to his daughter,

Emma Douglas Tapps Gervis Meyrick (1851-1934), who, in 1878, married Major Gerald Robert Spencer, and presumably later returned to her nephew,

Sir George Llewelyn Tapps Gervis Meyrick, 5th Bt. (1885-1960), by whom given to his younger brother,

Captain Richard Owen Tapps Gervis Meyrick (1892-1948), Buckland Abbey, Devon, and Nutwell Court, Devon, and by descent;

Anonymous sale, 2024, where acquired by the previous owner, to 2025