JOHN BENNETT fine paintings

A Portrait of a Young Boy

PHILIP MERCIER

Sold

London, England

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REF: 145869

Description

PHILIP MERCIER 1689-1760French SchoolA Bust Portrait of a Young Boy in a feigned ovalOil on canvas55.9 x 43.2 cms22 x 17 inches
Philip Mercier was an important painter of great ability who was one of the first in England to adopt the work of Watteau, doing so in the 1720s. He was one of the innovators of the conversation piece from 1725 and to produce the domestic 'fancy' picture from 1730. Such innovations are in themselves enough to commend the artist to our attention.

His personality and art were compounded of a number of foreign influences: he was born in Berlin in 1689 or 1691 to French Huguenot parents and studied painting and engraving firstly in Berlin at the Academy under the instruction of the French-born history and portrait painter Antoine Pesne. He then went to Paris and had worked also in Hanover before settling in London in about 1716. It was in Paris that he gained an intimate knowledge of Watteau's work, making engravings and, some maintain, actually producing forgeries of paintings. Since little substantial is known of his activity before he came to London, he is generally accepted as an English artist whose pleasant and often surprising work resulted from a naturally French inclination being modified by an English environment.

Mercier married in England in 1719 but travelled to France soon after. The specific reason is not certain but in 1724 he held a sale of pictures "collected abroad" so whether he was commissioned to find Master paintings in Europe or did so on his own initiative, cannot be established.

Being a German speaker was of significant benefit to the young artist especially in gaining contacts in the Hanoverian Court which was somewhat disconnected from its new environment. He was patronised by the courtiers and when Frederick, Prince of Wales arrived in England from Hanover, Mercier was appointed "Principal Portrait Painter" to the Prince, an office which he held from 1728-36, then "Page of the Bedchamber" in 1729 and also Library Keeper 1730-38. Mercier's delicate and flattering style of portraiture is best exemplified by the contemporary description of Princess Anne as "…fat, short and disfigured by smallpox" which is far removed from the way the artist portrayed her.

A fine Court painting from this period which shows the continental lightness of touch making serious incursions into the more established style of portraiture is "The Music Party" which depicts the Prince and Princess Royal with his sisters Amelia and Caroline as musicians in the garden of Kew with the Dutch House beyond. This emerging style was partly as a result the new informality permeating society but the Price's endorsement gave it significant credence. Frederick's enthusiasm for this new approach can partly be attributed to the dissonance between the King and his eldest son. The latter was ill-suited to very much apart from an appreciation of the arts and he made a conspicuous effort to do everything at variance form how his father would approach things. The Music Party was also a subtle satire as Frederick's sisters were instructed by their father not to talk to him.

Mercier's style deve...

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