

Anna Tonelli (née Nistri)



Portrait of a lady in a white headdress wearing a white dress

Reference: 10836

Dimensions:

Height: 26.10 cm / 10¼ in

Width: 22.60 cm / 8⅞ in

KAREN TAYLOR

FINE ART

Pastel, inscribed on reverse of original backboard: Anna Tonelli/fece in Londra/1796, in the original frame bearing the inscription Anna Tonelli H.D.Hamilton 1796

26.1 x 22.6 cm.; 10 ¼ x 8 7/8 inches

Provenance

Mellors & Kirk, Nottingham, 9-10 June 2011, lot 713 (as of Tonelli by Hugh Douglas Hamilton);

Private collection, U.K. until 2022

Literature

N. Jeffares, Dictionary of Pastellists before 1800, online edition, no. J.722.167

Anna Tonelli, née Nistri, was probably trained in Florence, possibly by Giuseppe Piattoli (1743-1823) with whom she collaborated on a portrait of the family of Granduca Pietro Leopoldo, which was engraved in 1785. At some stage before 1785 she married the virtuoso violinist Luigi Tonelli. It seems highly likely that she came across the work of Hugh Douglas Hamilton in Rome.

Tonelli met Lord Clive, 'Clive of India', while he was travelling in Italy, and he employed her to make pastels of members of his family. From 1794 she taught drawing to his children in London. She exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1794 and 1797, giving her address as 97 Norton Street. The artist travelled with the Clive family to India between 1798 and 1801, moving around southern India with Lady Clive and her daughters. During her time in the subcontinent, she seems to have worked in watercolour or miniature, rather than pastel, and charged twelve to thirty guineas for a miniature. She painted the Rajah of Tanjore and Tipu Sultan on this trip. She returned to Florence in 1801.

Tonelli's work has been confused with that of Hugh Douglas Hamilton, which may account for the inscription on the frame. She is known to have copied his work for Lord Clive, producing portraits in 1790s to add to a series begun by Hamilton. It seems unlikely that Hamilton has any connection with the present work, as he had returned to Ireland by this date.

In 1806 the American agent in Paris, Filippo Mazzei, engaged her to bring up his daughter Elisabetta. He provided a description of the family to Thomas Jefferson (letter, 20th July 1806) with a view to their emigrating to the USA, praising the father, a violinist 'the peer of any other', the two children (born c.1789-90), and the mother who 'sings and plays the piano like an expert; knows very well her own language, French, and English; draws and paints with excellent taste; is accomplished in embroidery and all needlework; and knows geography quite well.' Jefferson's response highlighted the expense of living in a major city, which may have deterred the family, as by 2 November 1807 they were in Pisa with Mazzei, while by 1809 they seem to have returned to Florence.

I am grateful to Neil Jeffares for his biographical information about the artist.