PERUKES, POWDER, AND PLAITS: A BRIEF HISTORY OF HAIR THROUGH PORTRAIT MINIATURES

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Hair is certainly not something that has been overlooked in art history. Artists themselves have been obsessed by it- and many of the best-known portraits in art history feature magnificent heads of hair. Think Albrecht Durer's Self-Portrait from 1500 [1], Sandro Botticelli's Venus [2], and John Everett Millais' Bridesmaid [3]. Not only is the hair a focus in these paintings but also in the processes that artists go through to create them- Dürer was said to use specific types of hair on his brushes to paint such fine strands of hair as he did, and even curled his own locks- possibly the reason that the waves in his self-portrait are so convincing.

Working with portrait miniatures, which have to concentrate so much detail into such a small space anyway, it often strikes one that hair forms a large portion of the art that we are looking at. For a sitter with a particularly large hairstyle, this can take up over a third of the space. Though we appreciate it for the detail and beauty of its depiction in all of the miniatures that we talk about, it seemed to warrant its own, separate discussion. The following will open that discussion, and run through a brief history of some of the hair in the miniatures that have passed through the hands of The Limner Company.

Tudor, Elizabethan, and early Stuart hairstyles

It was in the Tudor period that limning emerged as a separate art form, apart from manuscript illumination. Therefore, it seems to be a sensible point at which to begin looking at how trends in hairstyles were represented within these miniature portraits.

During the reign of Henry VIII, especially in known examples of miniatures from the period, hair tended to be represented in a simple way, and was often covered with a cap, or cut to a short length (for men, that is). These more toned-back styles had been largely influenced by religious beliefs. In contrast, the dawn of the Elizabethan period, and the beginning of the patronage of miniaturists like Nicholas Hilliard (1547-1619) and Isaac Oliver (1556-1617) brought with it more variation and interest in the styles that were being depicted. Their general appearance is freer, and more exciting. Take the Portrait of a Nobleman with Impresa, 1610s, by Isaac Oliver (fig.1) [4]. There are a few interesting stylistic elements to the sitter's hair, but one of the most notable is the lock of hair that falls down onto his left shoulder. This is known as a 'lovelock', and was purposeful, even if it may look to us like a piece that has been missed from his haircut. To contemporaries, this piece of hair would have signalled to others that this nobleman was in a dedicated relationship. This would have looked different on different sitters, and could sometimes be plaited or, as in this example, curled. Not only does it show us a trend in hair at the time, as we are interested in here, but gives us more information about who this sitter was. He is not identified, but was certainly in a relationship.

Other examples of 'lovelocks' can be found in miniatures such as the portrait of an Unknown Young Man, c. 1588, by Nicholas Hilliard [5]. This miniature once belonged in the Victoria and Albert Museum. Despite being painted a few decades apart, they show some clear continuations in style. Other than the 'lovelock', they both sport similar moustaches and a soul patch. Fashioning facial hair in this way was common at the time, especially in the miniatures that Hilliard was painting. For other examples of this, one of the intriguing miniatures by the master limner in the V & A, A Man among Flames (1588) [6] should be referred to.

Another miniature from the early Stuart period by Hilliard tells us part of the story of women's hair in the early seventeenth century. This is the portrait miniature of Lady Dorothy Sidney (née Percy), c.1615 (fig.2) [7]. Sidney's hair, decorated with many flowers, cascades down her shoulders and matches the other floral decorations on her clothes. Elizabethan women, including the Queen herself, were often depicted with decorated hair. However, the free-flowing nature of this shows a shift in how exactly this could be styled. Katherine Coombs calls one of the images of Elizabeth that shows a similar hairstyle 'unusual' [8]. One of the main changes that should be brought to mind is the nature of the New Jacobean court in England. During his reign, James I was known for the grand performances and masques that he would hold within this court. These performances, written and directed by the great creative minds of the day like Inigo Jones, would feature members of the court dressed up and playing different characters. It has been suggested that, in this miniature, Sidney could be dressed in the guise of Flora, Roman goddess of flowers. In this period, therefore, women's hair was on occasion being 'dressed up', and this is the reason that such a distinctive style appears in this particular miniature.

Fig.1: Isaac Oliver, Portrait of a Nobleman, c.1610s, watercolour on vellum (41mm high), previously with The Limner Company.

Fig.2: Nicholas Hilliard, Lady Dorothy Sidney (néePercy) (c.1598-1659), later Countess of Leicester, c.1615, Watercolour on Vellum (52mm), sold by The Limner Company.

The later Stuart period and the advent of the wig

Skipping ahead a few monarchs, one of the Limner Company's next iconic hairstyles comes from King Charles II (1630-1685). The accession of the 'Merry Monarch' brought with it many depictions of his distinctive hair. A few of these miniatures have passed through the hands of The Limner Company. Currently, a depiction by Matthew Snelling (1621-1678) (fig.3) [9] provides an example of this. Charles is painted with his dark, thick and curly head of hair. This was a style that other men adopted in this period, including the gentleman painted by David des Granges (c.1611- c.1672), also with the Limner Company [10]. The fact that des Granges was able to depict this style so well is not surprising- the artist had been commissioned by Charles to produce multiple miniatures of the monarch.

Apart from its appearance, however, what Charles II had done with his hair also signified a large change in the trends of the time. Richard Corson, in his important volume on the history of hair, informs us that it was during the reign of Charles II that wigs had first appeared on the male fashion scene [11]. Before this time, they were popular in France. The King was not happy with his grey hair, and therefore a wig was essential to cover this up. Samuel Pepys (1633-1703), in his diary, on the 2nd November 1633, notes that this day was the first in which he had noticed the King greying [12]. It is likely that from this point on people were aware of him using such a wig, and would also be likely to copy this trend. An example of this happening can be found in Nicholas Dixon's (1660-1708) Portrait of a Nobleman, c.1680 [13]. The wig that this nobleman wears is of a similar style to that in Snelling's depiction of the King. However, it differs in that the hair is still grey. What this highlights is the fact that it was not necessarily hair colour that people were avoiding, but instead ageing in general. A wig could be made of one's own hair, immortalised in a certain style. It is possible that this is what this nobleman had chosen to do.

Both trends of wearing a wig and using one's own hair in it to prevent ageing contrast greatly with the trends sported by Oliver Cromwell (1599-1638) in a portrait miniature by Bernard Lens (1682-1740) (fig.4) [14]. It is widely known that the Puritan ruler was keen to have himself portrayed in a realistic way, and wearing a wig could have shown some level of excess that he was keen not to be associated with. Here, he is depicted with thin, grey, hair that is clearly receding. There is no sign of any intervention to help reduce the look of his hair ageing. Side by side, the two powerful men of the period could not look more different. Not only does this give us some information about the styles of the time, but also the political messages that could be expressed through these paintings. Here, Cromwell, in a later depiction, has been separated drastically from his enemy.

Fig. 3 [left]: Matthew Snelling, King Charles II, c.1665, watercolour on vellum (80mm high) - to be offered by The Limner Company at London Art Week 2024.

Fig. 4 [right]: Bernard Lens, Portrait of Oliver Cromwell, watercolour on vellum (28mm high) - to be offered by The Limner Company at London Art Week 2024.

Wigs and Powdered hair from the early 18th century

The wigs that became more popular in the later Stuart period did retain some of their popularity moving into the early 18th century. In fact, they were perceived to be quite valuable things. Corson quotes a newspaper article from 1717, reporting that men travelling in hackney carriages had been hit with a wave of robberies [15]. Thieves would cut a hole in the back of the carriage and take the wig straight off of the wearer's head. Though an amusing thing to picture, it only emphasises how much of a sign of wealth these accessories could be.

Later, certain wigs would become associated with certain professions, in the same way that we would recognise a Judge's or Barrister's wig today. Noah Seaman's (fl.1724-1741) Portrait of a Professional (fig.5) [16] demonstrates this. He wears a gown but is also pictured with a long, grand, white wig that could have distinguished him from other members of society at the time.

It was at the beginning of the 18th century that wigs began to be decorated with powder, too [17]. It was this development within the history of hair that provides us with some of the bright colours that we see in paintings and miniatures. Powder came in many different colours- off-white, pink, lilac, and shades of blue, and some of these colours would also be scented and have essential oils added to them. In fact, it has been suggested that these oils could naturally deter lice, and had more of a purpose than just vanity [18]. Such powder would be applied to the wigs, or straight on to natural hair, using a pair of bellows, with a mask used to protect the face from being coated.

Fig. 5: Noah Seaman, Portrait enamel of a Professional, c.1730, enamel on metal (44mm high) - The Limner Company.

The prominence of wigs for men would not last, however. Throughout the 18th century, they began to get smaller, and a focus on natural hair became more prominent. Other hair styles could still be used to demonstrate status. For example, portrait miniatures of military and naval officers, like that of Sir Thomas Pakenham (1757-1836) by Horace Hone (1754-1825) (fig.9) [19], show men wearing their hair en queue, meaning that it was tied down in the back of the head, like a braid. This may have been a practical measure, but would also become a visual distinction between these men and other members of society, just as the 'lovelock' did in the Elizabethan era.

Not wearing a wig was also the more common fashion amongst women, throughout this period. One of the most striking examples of women's hair from the 18th century that The Limner Company has been able to look into is the portrait of an unknown woman by John Smart (1741-1811), from 1785 [20]. She has a wonderful head of pink hair, which is thrown up into a curly updo and adorned with an ostrich feather. Her hair only emphasises her glamour, and complements the lilac dress that she wears. This brings us back to the fact that powdering hair was extremely popular, and though wigs may not have been worn so commonly by women, the former trend was certainly one that they participated in. Another fine example of natural hair being styled in the same period can be found in Engleheart's portrait of a 'Miss Hill'. The sitter wears a ribbon in her hair, that is possibly powdered to give it the off-white colour that it has. Again, it is all her own hair, just curled and styled in a way to make it look voluminous. Women who were wearing wigs at the time were made fun of for this fashion, and were the target of satire, so it is not surprising that this was something that they were avoiding.

John Smart was likely to know a lot about the trends and fashions in hair, his father having been a peruke or wig maker in London [20]. It may have been for this reason that he tended to focus so much on this feature within his portrait miniatures and adorned his sitters with so many different coloured coiffures. Another example of him doing this can be found in his portrait miniature of Consul Charles Murray (fig. 7) [22]. Again, he wears his hair en queue, and has a pink head of hair, that could possibly be a wig.

Fig. 6 [left]: John Smart, Portrait Miniature of a Lady, 1785, watercolour on ivory (54mm high) - sold by The Limner Company.

Fig. 7 [right]: John Smart, A Gentleman, traditionally identified as Consul Murray, 1772, watercolour on ivory (31mm high) - to be offered by The Limner Company at London Art Week 2024.

Past the point of powder

In the early 19th century, the colourful, powdered hair, that seems so intriguing to the modern eye, became less popular. It was in this period that a lot of the portraits that we see not only feature the sitter's natural hair but also their natural hair colour. Remaining on portraits of women, the portrait miniature of Martha Walsh (née Bellingham) by Anne Langton (1804-1893) [23] shows this change. Her hair is still quite voluminous, and there is a hint towards the styling of Smart and Englehart, however it is clearly meant to look more natural, and less toyed with. This is certainly the case with its colour.

Part of the reason for this is that there were now limits on the purchase of powder. In 1795 a licence fee had been put in place, meaning that not as many people could afford to buy powder any more. The only people who were not subject to this fee were soldiers and the royal family. Of course, this did not stop the use of powder completely, and some people were still willing to pay the price. Still, it provides some explanation as to why sitters like Martha Bellingham appeared to be more natural. It also reveals to us that other sitters may have simply just liked powdered hair as a style, and wanted to continue wearing it as a trend. This could be suggested for Pakenham, who was painted with powdered hair by Hone (fig.9) following the introduction of this powder licence.

Fig. 8 [left]: Anne Langton, Portrait of Martha Walsh (née Bellingham), 1832, watercolour on ivory (102mm high) - The Limner Company.

Fig. 9 [right]: Horace Hone, Portrait miniature of of Sir Thomas Pakenham, 1799, watercolour on ivory (73mm high) - The Limner Company.

Conclusion

The history of hair warrants a much longer explanation than this blog can give. However, it can be seen through these examples of miniatures that hair was more than just hair. This was something that could demonstrate trends at the time, but can also tell us more personal information about the sitters in these portraits. Whether this was their relationship status, their professional status, or simply whether they could afford to may a fee or not, it goes to show that this top third of portraits is not one that should be overlooked.

[1] Albrecht Dürer, Self Portrait, 1500, oil on panel (61.7 cm x 48.9 cm), Alte Pinakothek, Munich, accession number: 537.

[2] Sandro Botticelli, The Birth of Venus, c.1484-1486, tempera on canvas (172.5 cm × 278.9 cm), Uffizi, Florence, accession number: 1890 n. 878.

[3] John Everett Millais, The Bridesmaid, 1851, oil on panel (27.9 cm x 20.3 cm), Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, accession number: 499*.

[4] Isaac Oliver, Portrait of a Nobleman, c.1610s, watercolour on vellum (41mm high), previously with The Limner Company.

[5] Illustrated in K. Coombs, The Portrait Miniature in England, V & A Publications, London, 1998, p.39.

[6] A Man among Flames, Nicholas Hilliard, Watercolour on Vellum (69x 54mm), Victoria and Albert Museum, London, accession number: P.5-1917.

[7] Nicholas Hilliard, Lady Dorothy Sidney (néePercy) (c.1598-1659), later Countess of Leicester, c.1615, Watercolour on Vellum (52mm), with The Limner Company.

[8] K. Coombs, The Portrait Miniature in England, V & A Publications, London, 1998, p. 51.

[9] Matthew Snelling, King Charles II, c.1665, watercolour on vellum (80mm high), with The Limner Company.

[10] David des Granges, Portrait of a Gentleman, watercolour on vellum (54mm high), with The Limner Company.

[11] R. Corson, Fashions in Hair: the first five thousand years, Hillary House, New York, 1971, p. 205.

[12] Samuel Pepys, The Diary of Samuel Pepys, entry Monday, 2nd November, 1663. Accessed online, https://www.pepysdiary.com/diary/1663/11/02/.

[13] Nicolas Dixon, Portrait of a Nobleman, watercolour on vellum, with The Limner Company.

[14] Bernard Lens, Portrait of Oliver Cromwell, watercolour on vellum (28mm high), with The Limner Company.

[15] R. Corson, Fashions in Hair: the first five thousand years, Hillary House, New York, 1971, p.264.

[16] Noah Seaman, A Portrait Enamel of a Professional, c.1730, enamel on metal (44m high), with The Limner Company.

[17] R. Corson (1971) says that the first date was about 1703. (R. Corson, Fashions in Hair: the first five thousand years, Hillary House, New York, 1971, p. 275).

[18] Abby Cox, Historian Reacts to Weird History's History of Powdered Wigs, YouTube video, 12th June 2022, accessed online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PIYUVHIUdfM&t=945s.

[19] Horace Hone, Portrait of Sir Thomas Pakenham, 1799, watercolour on ivory (73mm high), with The Limner Company.

[20] John Smart, Portrait Miniature of a Lady, 1785, watercolour on ivory (54mm high), sold through The Limner Company.

[21] E. Rutherford et. al, John Smart (1741-1811): A Genius Magnified, Philip Mould & Company, 2014.

[22] John Smart, A Gentleman, traditionally identified as Consul Murray, 1772, watercolour on ivory (31mm high), with The Limner Company.

[23] Anne Langton, Portrait of Martha Walsh (née Bellingham), 1832, watercolour on ivory (102mm high), with The Limner Company.