THE LIMNER COMPANY



NICHOLAS HILLIARD (c.1547 NICHOLAS - 1619)

Portrait miniature of a courtier, possibly Sir William Drury (1550–1590) wearing a gold edged armour over a white doublet, a lace-trimmed collar and a gold-embroidered blue sash, with a blue-enamelled earring, woodland and sky background, gold border

Circa: Circa 1587

Circa 1587

Watercolour and bodycolour on parchment with gold

Associated gold frame with scroll surmount

Oval, 34 mm (1 $^{3}/_{8}$ inches) high

The present work, datable to the late 1580s/ early 1590s, presents an unusual portrait within the artist's oeuvre. Very few of Hilliard's miniatures have a landscape background – and even fewer on this smaller scale. It is possible that the work relates to a larger 'cabinet' miniature, and is either cut down from a larger image or a smaller version of a full length work. This conjecture is perhaps further supported by the miniature's gold border, which sits just in from the edge instead of on it.

While Hilliard occasionally deviated from his characteristic bright blue backgrounds, his bust-length portraits invariably used a solid background, such as a curtain, to offset the figure. The few miniatures where the sitter is set in the open air belong to the final decades of the 16th century – including the standing figure of the Young Man Among Roses (probably Robert Devereux, 2nd Earl of Essex, datable to circa 1588), George Clifford, 3rd Earl of Cumberland, circa 1590 and the recently discovered cabinet miniature of Arbella Stuart, circa 1592.[1]

Both the sitter's dress and Hilliard's technique allow a date around the late 1580s for this portrait. Wearing a blue sash and in military garb, the sitter is likely a member of the Protestant elite at Elizabeth I's court. His military gorget[2] and blue sash threaded with gold align with the dress of Sir Anthony

Mildmay, painted in a cabinet miniature by Hilliard circa 1590-93.[3] As Elizabeth Goldring has noted, these men were followers of Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex, who from the late 1580s became a favourite of the Queen, gathering around him a group of men who gained power from being in his orbit.[4] Many of these men had also fought under his step father, Robert Dudley, earl of Leicester in the Netherlands, and consequently commissioned portraits of themselves with military attributes.

One possible candidate for the sitter is Sir William Drury (1550-1590), who may have been depicted by Hilliard just before he left for the Continent in 1588. Although he inherited considerable wealth from his grandfather in Suffolk (including Hawstead Place, where in 1578 he entertained Queen Elizabeth I), he eventually fled to Low Countries owing the Exchequer £5000. Knighted by Elizabeth I in 1578, within a decade he had acted as MP and High Sherriff for Suffolk, but had squandered his inheritance. In self-enforced exile, he was appointed Governor of Bergen-op-Zoom in the Netherlands but was seriously injured in a duel after a quarrel with Sir John Borough, losing his hand and then arm to gangrene which shortly afterwards took his life. The present portrait shows striking facial similarities with the full-length portrait by Daniël van den Queborne (1552/1557-1602/1605), painted in the Netherlands.[5] As with other portraits of courtiers at this period associated with followers of Essex, the sitter is shown wearing with armour and a sash in the open air.

[1] Hilliard's 'Young Man Among Roses' is in The Victoria and Albert Museum, London; 'George Cifford, 3rd Earl of Cumberland' is in the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich. For the cabinet miniature of Arbella Stuart by Hilliard see The Burlington Magazine, A newly discovered cabinet miniature

by Nicholas Hilliard, by Elizabeth Goldring and Emma Rutherford, April 2024.

[2] At this date, the gorget was a steel collar to protect and cover the neck, opening in a complete cuirass. It was unlike a modern shirt collar in that as well as covering the front and back of the neck it also covered part of the clavicles, sternum and the back of the wearer.

[3] Cleveland Museum of Art. A cabinet miniature was a larger free-standing limning, designed not to be worn but to be displayed in a 'cabinet room' with other worthy treasures.

[4] E. Goldring, Nicholas Hilliard: Life of an Artist (The Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art), 2019, p. 230.

[5] Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection, B1973.1.15.