

THE LIMNER COMPANY



NICHOLAS HILLIARD (c.1547 NICHOLAS - 1619)

Portrait miniature of a Soldier, wearing white doublet and ruff, jewel-set gorget, yellow embroidered sash and gilt-banded helmet with white plumes on a purple velvet plinth behind

Circa: 1614

1614

Watercolour on parchment

Gold calligraphy 'Ætatis Suæ [...] 1614'

Associated silver frame with engraved border

Oval, 52 mm (2 inches) high

Copies after: Two probably later copies after the present miniature, one in the Cholmondeley Collection, and one in the Pierpont Morgan Collection (G. C. Williamson, Catalogue of the Collection of Portrait Miniatures, The Property of J. Pierpont Morgan, London, 1906, I, no. 44, as by Isaac Oliver, sold Christie's, 5 June 2007, lot 98) are both said to depict Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex (1566-1601); Fine Portrait Miniatures, Bonhams, 25 November 2009, lot 104 (shown with blue sash)

Both the unusual composition of this miniature and its exceptional quality have led historians since at least the nineteenth-century to attempt to find an identity. Various identified as King James VI & I when exhibited in 1861 and later as possibly George Clifford, 3rd Earl of Cumberland (1558-1605), these remain unconvincing as possibilities.

The sitter's age in the calligraphy has been removed but may suggest that he was forty years of age. The date of 1614 is a later addition – the miniature being painted circa 1600 – making the sitter's birth year around 1560. While Cumberland was born 1558, and therefore a potential candidate, his facial features do not quite align with the other portraits of him by Hilliard. Certainly the sitter here is painted in the same vein as these heroes of the battlefield or joust.

The inclusion of the helmet in the present miniature is unusual in Hilliard's oeuvre of this size; in fact this seems to be a unique example. Hilliard's inclusion of additional objects in his miniatures often seemed to present him with compositional challenges. Here, as in the full length cabinet miniature of Sir Anthony Mildmay (Cleveland Museum of Art), the helmet is placed on a cloth-covered surface, while in the cabinet miniature of circa 1590 of George Clifford, 3rd Earl of Cumberland (National Maritime Museum, Greenwich), his plumed helmet lies awkwardly propped at the base of a tree. While the helmet in the present work appears unnaturally placed, it does not appear to have been added, with the yellow pigment in the plumes identical to that in the yellow sash.

Exhibitions

Bristol, Industrial Exhibition, 1861;

London, South Kensington Museum, Special Exhibition of Works of Art, 1862, no. 1993.

Literature:

The Encyclopedia of Antiques, Wigston, 1993, illustrated p. 235 and in colour p. 119.