THE LIMNER COMPANY



NICHOLAS HILLIARD (c.1547 - 1619) and LAURENCE HILLIARD (1583-1648)

Portrait miniature of a Gentleman wearing a slashed black doublet, a standing collar edged with lace, a grey streak in his hair, a gold hoop earring with a black cord, a blue sash edged with gold embroidery, the pommel of a sword visible at his left side; with a blue background and a gold border

Circa: Circa 1610

Watercolour and bodycolour, with gold on parchment

Oval 2 in. (51 mm) high

Later gilded metal frame

This portrait miniature has previously been fully attributed to Nicholas Hilliard, the trusted image maker of Elizabeth I, but more in depth analysis suggests that this portrait is more likely to have been a collaboration between Nicholas and his son Laurence. Laurence was the fourth of eight children born to Nicholas and his wife, Anne Brandon (c.1556-1611?), daughter of royal goldsmith Robert Brandon (d.1591) and was named after his paternal grandmother, Laurence Hilliard (née Wall) (d.1604).

Laurence was the only child to follow in his father's illustrious footsteps as a limner (the sixteenth-century term for miniature painter) and medallist. He is thought to have begun an apprenticeship with his father in the second half of the 1590s, possibly at the age of 13 in 1595, although presumably he observed his father's practice from an earlier age. It has been suggested that Nicholas Hilliard's revered treatise, The Arte of Limning (written between 1598-1603), may have been written in part for Laurence's benefit.[1]

The present miniature can be dated, based on the costume, to the early years of the reign of King James VI & I. The sitter wears a fashionable 'pinked' or slashed doublet, revealing a pink/amber lining and a rebato collar, a wide fan-shaped collar with a wired support and usually trimmed (if not decorate all over) with lace. The ruff gradually evolved into what we would recognise as a collar (the contemporary term was 'band') around the turn of the century, and this style of standing collar is more consistently seen in portraiture circa 1610. The artist's description of the fine lace detail, delineating the exact

pattern of what would have been extremely expensive needlepoint lace, was a trademark skill of the Hilliards'. Close analysis of the portrait under a microscope shows that the quality in the depiction of this fine lace was more likely to have been painted by Nicholas, as few works by his son show such mastery. The face, however, is far closer to the known works by Laurence, with the features more homogenous than his father's late limnings. This is most likely a work by Laurence supervised by his father.

Nicholas Hilliard's practice had continued after the death of Queen Elizabeth I in 1603, whom he had served as royal limner. Hilliard's pre-eminent role as Elizabeth's image maker, meant that he was well positioned to provide continuity for the incoming monarch, James VI & I. There was increasing competition from his former pupil, Isaac Oliver (c.1565-1617), yet Hilliard was the first artist to whom James sat for a portrait, and is believed to have designed James's Great Seal.[2] It was at this time that he established a role for Laurence at court, stating proudly to Robert Cecil in 1606, 'my Soon…doth his Majestie now good service, bothe in Lymne pictures, and in ye medals'.[3]

Laurence's works are rare by comparison to his fathers, perhaps indicative of the fact that the Hilliard practice's monopoly over courtiers did not endure under King James. The Hilliards vied with Oliver for commissions from courtiers, nobles and the wealthy middle classes. Examples of subjects comparable to the present miniature include two works by Oliver in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, one depicting an unknown gentleman circa 1605-10, and the other, Richard Sackville, 3rd Earl of Dorset (1589-1624), circa 1616. The latter's costume bears particular similarities, notably the embroidered sash worn over the right shoulder. Sashes signified military service, Sackville being at this time Lord Lieutenant of Sussex. The blue sash worn by the present sitter is thought to have been reserved for senior officers[4] and a seemingly identical sash is worn by Sir Anthony Mildmay (c. 1549–1617) in a cabinet portrait by Hilliard circa 1590-93 (Cleveland Museum of Art).

The English were involved in three main conflicts at the end of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. The largest English campaign of the age was the excessively brutal Tudor colonisation of Ireland. Specifically between 1593-1603, the Nine Years' War or 'Tyrone's Rebellion' saw huge numbers of English soldiers fighting in Ireland. The Anglo-Spanish war spanned nearly 20 years, encompassing much of western Europe. Although never formally declared, the English and Spanish battled intermittently, beginning with Robert Dudley, the Earl of Leicester's expedition in 1585 to the Spanish Netherlands. There was also occasional intercession in the French Wars of Religion.

Hilliard painted several cabinet portraits of the military protestant elite in the 1590s, the aforementioned portrait of Mildmay amongst them. These full-length portraits can be considered among the artist's masterpieces, for no quality or detail is lost in the greater size of these limnings. This sitter may have been aware of these earlier militant portraits and be emulating them with in a small way here.

A sword pommel is also visible on the sitter's left side; no doubt shown much higher than it would have been worn in real life, the artist was clearly under pains to include it. Swords could be lavish status symbols, beautifully adorned by jewellers and goldsmiths, and although this sitter appears to be a military officer, swords were often worn as accessories. Indeed, inventories of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries tend to group personal weapons with their owner's clothing rather than with other weapons.[5] While our sitter is at present unknown, he appears to be both fashionable and a man-at-arms.

Another eye-catching accessory is the gold hoop earring with a black cord tied through it. The knotted cord could be a lover's knot and significant of a loved one. This and the distinctive grey streak in his coiffed hair (which some sitters may have requested be excluded), suggest the intended recipient had an intimate connection to the sitter.

[1] Goldring, Elizabeth, Nicholas Hilliard; Life of an Artist (Paul Mellon Centre), 2019, p.244

[2] Goldring, p.252

[3] Cecil Papers 115/130 (Hilliard to Robert Cecil 6 May 1606), quoted in Goldring, p.251

[4] https://weaponsandwarfare.com/2016/01/05/the-army-of-elizabeth-i/ accessed 16 April 2024

[5] Angus Patterson, Fashion and Armour in renaissance Europe (V&A Publishing, Victoria and Albert Museum), 2009, p.60