THE LIMNER COMPANY



ISAAC OLIVER (c.1565 - 1617)

Portrait miniature of a Nobleman wearing a black doublet with an embroidered pink sash, a rebato collar with scalloped lace edging, and a large gem stone earring; his hair in a 'lovelock' on his left; a gold sunburst over his right shoulder

Circa: 1610s

1610s

Watercolour on parchment, laid on card in later gold frame with engraved reverse and pierced spiral cresting

Inscribed 'J'eclaircirà[i]' ('I will brighten')

Oval, 41 mm (1 $^{5}/_{8}$ inches) high

As a student to Nicholas Hilliard (1547-1619), Isaac Oliver (c.1565-1617) had not only been trained by one of the greatest masters of limning in his period, but had also been provided access to a wealth of important patrons. It may have been this studentship that resulted in the miniature being attributed to the older master in the past. At this point in his career, Oliver had been employed as limner to the Queen of Denmark, and had painted her and her eldest son Henry, Prince of Wales, numerous times. After becoming the Queen's limner, he married Sara Gheeraerts (c1575-1605), daughter of Marcus Gheeraerts (1561-1636), portraitist at the Tudor court.

Though the sitter of this portrait remains unidentified, the timing of its creation and observations of features of the composition suggest that he would have been part of the Jacobean court. This is suggested by elements of his dress; such a large, lace collar and black silk doublet would have allowed the sitter to fit in with the fashion of the court at this time. Two features in the right side of the composition also reveal facts about the nobleman. The lock of hair that falls down towards his shoulder was known as a 'lovelock', and was used to signify that the sitter was loyal to a loved one. This was something featured in other portraits by Oliver, including an even larger example in a miniature of Thomas Fones[1]. Also, what now appears to be a black gem set into an earring would have at the time been a diamond, painted in silver, that has since oxidised.

The present miniature features other elements that can be recognised in other works by Oliver, which may have formed part of the reason for its recent reattribution. For example, the brilliantly decorated and embroidered sash worn by the nobleman bears a resemblance to that worn by an unknown gentleman in a miniature sold at Christie's in 2019[2], and to the larger sash worn by Henry, Prince of Wales, in a miniature in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge[3]. Sashes like this were commonly used to identify positions in the military, so it is possible that our sitter was also a military man.

The inscription in a stunningly maintained gold pigment that can be found to the sitter's right translates to 'I will brighten', which links to the sunburst that has been illustrated next to it. An impresa like this would have traditionally been related to the sitter, however, as he remains unidentified, in this case we do not know in which way this related. It may be that this was meant to remind the owner of the miniature of who they were looking at. Given that there are other tokens of love featured here, like the lovelock, this owner could have been a loved one of the gentleman depicted.

[1] Sold Cheffins, 28/29 November 2018, lot 161.

[2] London, Christie's, 13 November 2019, lot 161.

[3] Isaac Oliver, Miniature of Henry Frederick, Prince of Wales, Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, 3903.

Exhibitions

Philip Mould & Company, London, Jewel in the Hand:

Early Portrait Miniatures from Noble & Private Collections, 12th March - 18th April 2019, cat no. 20;

Philip Mould & Company, London, Love's Labour's Found, 21 April-28 May 2021, cat.no 16.

Literature:

E. Rutherford et al.,

Philip Mould & Company, London, 2019, Jewel in the Hand:

Early Portrait Miniatures from Noble & Private Collections, cat no. 20, ill. p.86;

E. Rutherford;

L. Henrdra (Eds), Philip Mould & Company, London, 2021, Love's Labour's Found, cat.no 16, ill. p.91, p.93.