THE LIMNER COMPANY



ISAAC OLIVER (c.1565 - 1617)

Portrait miniature of a Nobleman wearing a white doublet with embroidery and slashes, and a lace-edged rebato collar; blue background with gold border

Circa: Circa 1615

Circa 1615

Watercolour on parchment, laid down on card

Contemporary gold locket frame (lid missing) with white and gold enamel border, the reverse with guilloché enamel

Oval, 51 mm (2 inches) high

This portrait miniature is by Isaac Oliver (c.1565-1617), who, alongside Nicholas Hilliard (1547-1619), was considered by his contemporaries to rank among the greatest masters of the Renaissance.[1] Unlike Hilliard, however, Oliver did travel to Italy, undertaking what would be a formative trip to Venice in the Spring of 1596. His oeuvre is loosely considered in two phases: pre- and post- his trip to Venice, the former with a more Flemish style and following Hilliard's use of crisp lines, the latter characterised by softer tones and stippling, as in the present example. This interest in Italianate modelling, quite distinct from his contemporaries in England, lead him to produce some of the most vivid portraits of the age.

The present work dates to the second phase of his career, circa 1615, by which time the artist had enjoyed the patronage of the royal family and much of the court for over a decade. Oliver was appointed limner to King James VI & I's queen consort, Anne of Denmark (1574-1619), in 1604, a position for which he was paid £40. He also became the preferred artist of Henry Frederick, Prince of Wales (1594-1612), and was appointed a member of his household. Multiple portraits by Oliver survive in the Royal Collection.

Although the sitter is, as yet, unidentified, he was clearly a man of fashion. His ensemble is similar to

that worn by Sir Edward Herbert, later 1st Lord Herbert of Cherbury (1581/2-1648) in a cabinet portrait by Oliver of around the same date (Powis Castle and Garden, Powys – National Trust 1183954). Both sitters wear white, richly embroidered doublets and rebato collars, with their hair neatly dressed. Their facial hair too has been styled, and both sitters wear the 'pique devant' beard, later popularised by Charles I. William Harrison (1535-93) noted this style in his Description of England (1577, rev. 1587), and observes how beard types were carefully chosen to flatter the wearer's face shape: 'And therefore, if a man have a lean and straight face, a Marquis Otto's cut [i.e. the pique devant] will make it broad and large; if it be platter-like, a long slender beard will make it seem much narrower; if he be weasel-becked, then much hair left on the cheeks will make the owner look big, like a bowdled [ruffled] hen, and so grim a goose'.[2]

This nobleman likely belonged to the extremely decadent Jacobean court, which spent excessively on fashion. While Elizabeth I is known for her love of finery, her successor, James I, spent more lavishly on his wardrobe and entertainment. Between the final years of Elizabeth's reign in 1601-02, and 1609-10, charges of the Royal Household increased by more than £40,000, £9,508 of which is attributed to the Jewel House.[3] Even allowing for inflation and the fact that James had a family to be appropriately clothed and provided for, the huge increase in spending can only be ascribed to the king's own extravagance.

This portrait miniature was formerly in the collection of lawyer and art historian, Robert Bayne-Powell (1910-1994). Bayne-Powell was made Honorary Keeper of the Miniatures at the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge in 1980, and in 1984 he became consultant on miniatures to Sotheby's.

[1] Goldring, E., Nicholas Hilliard; Life of an Artist (Paul Mellon Centre), 2019, p.247

[2] Edelen, G. (ed.), The Description of England: The Classic Contemporary Account of Tudor Social Life by William Harrison (Washington D.C. and New York, 2nd edn 1994), pp.146-147.

[3] Ashton, R., Deficit Finance in the Reign of James I, The Economic History Review, New Series, Vol. 10, No. 1 (1957), p. 15

Exhibitions

Philip Mould & Co., Jewel in the Hand: Early Portrait Miniatures from Noble & Private Collections, 12 March – 18 April 2019.

Literature:

Foskett, D., Collecting Miniatures (London, 1979), colour plate 3B, p.56;

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Aslet, W., Hendra, L., Ingram, R., Rutherford, E., Jewel in the Hand:

Early Portrait Miniatures from Noble & Private Collections (catalogue for the exhibition held at Philip Mould & Co., 12 March – 18 April 2019), Cat. No.14, p.67.