

THE LIMNER COMPANY



PETER OLIVER (Circa 1594 - 1647)

A Nobleman, facing right in gold-studded armour and lace ruff; red curtain background

Watercolour on parchment

Gold frame

signed in gold with initials 'P.O' (mid-right)

Oval, 42 mm (1 ⁵/₈ inches) high

This portrait of a young man wearing armour probably represents a member of the close circle of Charles, Prince of Wales (1600-1645), whose court was portrayed in limnings by Peter Oliver, son of the eldest son of the miniaturist Isaac Oliver, and who was trained by his father. On Isaac Oliver's death in 1617, his son took over his role as court limner. This miniature is signed by Peter Oliver with his monogram, his early work being almost indistinguishable from his father's. The 'wet-in-wet' red curtain background here was a technique perfected by Nicholas Hilliard and adapted by both Isaac and Peter Oliver.[1] Peter Oliver's technique differed from Hilliard, who had taught his father. Peter painted the contours of the face with short brushstrokes, viewing Hilliard's lack of chiaroscuro as somewhat archaic. His later portraits refined this technique as he perfected the same fine sfumato stippling demonstrated by his father.

The armour worn by the sitter here may give a clue to his identity. Eye-wateringly expensive and designed here perhaps for jousting, not combat, armour was bespoke and often contained family or personal emblems. This personalisation followed the etiquette first set out by Henry VIII and continued by his children, including Elizabeth I. Evidence of armour designs can be found in the 'Almain Armurer's Album' (known as the 'Jacob Album') is a book of designs by Jacob Halder, who worked on specific commissions from high profile courtiers in the later 16th century. As the Victoria and Albert Museum website explains; 'The production of armour was a highly sophisticated process. The designs in the Album record armours whose manufacture combined the skills of the artist, the tailor, the blacksmith, the goldsmith, the engineer and the locksmith. Their use demanded the skills of the courtier,

the soldier, the diplomat, the sportsman, the actor and the daredevil.’[2]

After the unexpected and tragic death of Henry Frederick, Prince of Wales, at the age of 18 in 1612, his younger brother Charles (later Charles I) became the focus of portraits by Peter Oliver. Where Henry Frederick had enjoyed running a sophisticated court, Charles was a more conservative prince. Highly intelligent and dynamic, Henry would have been an art collector to rival his brother had he lived; he was a zealot for sports and a natural leader. The Venetian ambassador wrote of Henry: ‘His authority was great... His designs were vast; his temper was grave, severe, reserved, brief in speech. All the hopes of these kingdoms were built on his high qualities.’ In a portrait of Charles, also in armour, which dates closely to the present miniature, Oliver has invested some of his late elder brother’s joie de vivre, depicting him with a large pearl earring and tentative moustache. It is clear when the present work is compared to this portrait that Henry’s cultural influences still loomed large after the court, even after almost a decade has passed since his death.

[1] Elizabeth Goldring notes that the red curtain painted in Hilliard’s wet-in-wet technique was first used circa 1590 (see E. Goldring, *Nicholas Hilliard: Life of an Artist*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, pp. 233, 236).

[2] Accessed 26 May 2022 <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O78116/the-almain-armourers-album-armour-design-halder-jacob/>

Literature:

M. Tomas, *La Miniatura Retrato en Espana*, 1953, pl. IX as by Isaac Oliver