THE LIMNER COMPANY



NICHOLAS HILLIARD (c.1547 - 1619)

Portrait miniature of a Noblewoman, possibly of Elizabeth, Lady Leighton (née Knollys) (1549-c.1605), wearing court dress in black and white, decorated with white bows and gold and diamond jewels, large 'cartwheel' ruff[1]; feather hairpiece and pearl in her curled auburn hair

Circa: Circa 1585

Circa 1585

Oval, 5.8 cm (2 $^{1}/_{4}$ inches) high

Watercolour, bodycolour, shell gold and silver on vellum; gold border

Later gilded metal frame with blue leather reverse; 18th century label from the original stained ivory frame reads 'This Picture of Queen Elizabeth is done from the life by either Old Hilliard or Old Isaac Oliver. It was given to me 1720 by a very old Lady a great great Neice [sic] of one of the Queens maids of Honor.'

Catalogue description by Dr. Elizabeth Goldring, September 2024.

At first glance, the sitter in this miniature by Nicholas Hilliard easily could be mistaken for Queen Elizabeth I. Indeed, a note on the back – written in an eighteenth-century hand believed to be that of Lady Catherine Power (daughter of James Power, third Earl of Tyrone of the second creation, and wife of Marcus Beresford, first Earl of Tyrone of the third creation) – reads: 'This Picture of Queen Elizabeth is done from the life by either Old Hilliard or Old Isaac Oliver. It was given to me 1720 by a very old Lady a great great Neice [sic] of one of the Queens maids of Honor.'

The miniature does depict a lady with similar colouring to Elizabeth I – and in a pose and format evocative of the 'mask of Queenship', the template Hilliard used for the vast majority of the miniatures of her that he produced c.1583-91.[3] However, on closer inspection, it is clear that the lady portrayed in the present miniature is not the Queen: the face is younger (and arguably much prettier) than that of the

‘mask of Queenship’, the hairline less recessed. Moreover, the sitter’s clothing and jewellery – though indicative of high rank and status – are not as opulent as that typically seen in Hilliard’s miniatures of Elizabeth I. If, then, the sitter is not Elizabeth I, who might she be? And when – and why – did she commission this portrait from Hilliard?

The question of ‘when’ is perhaps the easiest to answer. Everything about this miniature – from the style of the sitter’s ruff to the self-conscious echoes of Hilliard’s ‘mask of Queenship’ – suggests that it was executed c.1585-90. The sitter’s identity, together with the circumstances which gave rise to the commission, are more difficult to pin down – and may never be possible to recover with certainty. But perhaps there is a clue in the note added to the back of the miniature in the eighteenth century. Might the story recounted – though garbled in the re-telling – contain a grain of truth? Or, to put it another way, is the lady depicted in this miniature one of Elizabeth I’s maids of honour? If so, the most plausible candidate is probably Elizabeth, Lady Leighton.

Born c.1549 to Sir Francis Knollys and Catherine Carey (a niece of Anne Boleyn and maternal first cousin of Elizabeth I), the future Lady Leighton was, by 1560, serving as a Maid of Honour: an unpaid post filled by young, unmarried ladies of high birth whose job it was to attend the Queen at court events and at chapel and to generally act as exemplars of virtue and beauty.[4] Six years later, in 1566, she was appointed a Gentlewoman of the Privy Chamber: a salaried post, which involved tending to the Queen’s personal needs, such as preparing her clothing. In 1578, Elizabeth Knollys (see fig.1) wed Sir Thomas Leighton, soldier, diplomat, and sometime Governor of Jersey and Guernsey. Often, Sir Thomas was far away, in the Channel Islands or elsewhere, whilst Lady Leighton – who continued in her role as a Gentlewoman of the Privy Chamber until Elizabeth I’s death in 1603 – remained at court.

As is clear from a 1577 portrait in oils attributed to George Gower and now at Montacute, Lady Leighton possessed physical features – including curly auburn hair – very similar to those seen in this miniature. Moreover, she was at the heart of a group of courtiers who regularly commissioned work from Hilliard. In 1578, her sister Lettice married Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, who, from the early 1570s until his own death in 1588, was Hilliard’s chief patron.[5] Dudley commissioned multiple miniatures of himself from Hilliard – as did others in this circle, such as Penelope Devereux (Lettice’s daughter by her first husband, Walter Devereux, 1st Earl of Essex). Hilliard acknowledged his debt to this group of patrons in his choice of names for at least three of his children: a daughter born in 1583 was christened Lettice; another, born in 1586, Penelope; a son, born in 1588, Robert. In light of this web of connections, it would be surprising if Lady Leighton had not sat to Hilliard in the 1580s.

And what might have been the catalyst for such a commission? It is tempting to speculate that this miniature was intended as a love token for Sir Walter Ralegh, the poet-courtier and explorer. Certainly, Ralegh – whose love poetry includes ‘A Poem put into my Lady Laitons Pocket’ – was an ardent admirer:

‘Lady farewell whome I in silence serve

Woulde god thou knewest the depth of my desire

Then mought I wish though nought I can deserve

Some dropps of grace to slake my scalding fire

But sith to live alone I have decreed

lle spare to speake, that I may spare to speede.'[6]

Was this miniature a present for Ralegh, to put in his pocket, thus reciprocating for the gift of this poem? If so, it might help to explain the Irish provenance of the miniature, Ralegh having been Mayor of Youghal, County Cork, in 1588 and 1589. Intriguingly, a miniature of Ralegh by Hilliard, executed c.1585 and now in the National Portrait Gallery (see fig.2), depicts its sitter in a manner similar to that seen in the miniature. Like the unknown lady tentatively identified here as Lady Leighton, Ralegh is depicted in an oval format, pivoted slightly to his right, against a plain blue background with no inscription. Even by the standards of miniature painting, both images are very tightly focused on the face and ruff, thus drawing the viewer in and creating a heightened sense of intimacy.

[1] The 'cartwheel' ruff, fashionable from 1580, was one of the least practical of ruff designs. Comprised of six yards of fabric, starched into up to 600 pleats and extending 8 inches from the neck outwards.

[2] The stained ivory frame in which this miniature was originally housed cannot be sold with the miniature under the terms of the current Ivory Act.

[3] For the 'mask of Queenship', see Elizabeth Goldring, Nicholas Hilliard: Life of an Artist (2019), pp.172-78.

[4] For Elizabeth Knollys' career at court – and the significance of Maids of Honour and Gentlewomen of the Privy Chamber more generally – see Susan Doran, ed., Elizabeth: The Exhibition at the National Maritime Museum (2003), p.111; Paul E. J. Hammer, The Polarisation of Elizabethan Politics: The Political Career of Robert Devereux, 2nd Earl of Essex, 1585-1597 (1999), pp.282-83; Charlotte Merton, 'The Women Who Served Queen Mary and Queen Elizabeth: Ladies, Gentlewomen and Maids of the Privy Chamber,' University of Cambridge PhD thesis, 1992; Pam Wright, 'A Change in Direction: The Ramifications of a Female Household, 1558-1603,' in D.A.L. Morgan et al., eds., The English Court from the Wars of the Roses to the Civil War (1987), pp.147-73. At any one time, there were six Maids of Honour and seven or eight Gentlewomen of the Privy Chamber.

[5] See Goldring, Nicholas Hilliard, pp. 84, 90-91, 97, 103-09, 113-20, 122-27, 133, 165-66, 169-73, 182-84, 203, 205, 207, 223-27, 229-31.

[6] See Michael Rudick, ed., The Poems of Sir Walter Ralegh: A Historical Edition (1999), pp.15-16.