

THE LIMNER COMPANY



NICHOLAS HILLIARD (c.1547 - 1619)

A pair of portrait miniatures of Queen Elizabeth I (1533-1603) and Robert Dudley, 1st Earl of Leicester (1532-1588); she in a black bodice, pleated ruff, and gold jewelled necklace, with a veil and jewels in her hair; he wearing a black bodice, pleated ruff, collar of the Order of the Garter, and black cap with rubies

Circa: Circa 1575

Circa 1675

Watercolour on parchment

Gilt metal frame; gold bracelet slide frame

Both 19 mm ($\frac{3}{4}$ inches) high

These incredible miniatures tell a love story between the two sitters. Both are recognisable- Queen Elizabeth I, with her distinctive curls, and Robert Dudley, with his dark facial hair and good looks. Robert Dudley was a favourite of the Queen Elizabeth I, and had known her since she was around eight years old. For many years was thought to be her husband-in-waiting. His own wife had died in mysterious circumstances in 1560, and from then, until his own death in 1588, he remained close to the Queen and a centre of speculation. During his time in the court, he had been Master of the Horse, Knight of the Garter, and was appointed the Earl of Leicester in 1564. Ever since, their love has been the subject of popular interest, one of the more recent examples of which is the 1998 film featuring Kate Blanchett and Joseph Fiennes.

Hilliard, having painted many portraits of important members of the court, including the queen herself, in this period, was not a stranger to the Earl of Leicester. Another miniature, remarkably similar, yet of course larger than this unique example, can be found in the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London (fig.1). It similarly shows him adorned with jewels, and with his distinctive facial hair, curled down on his right side, and up on his left. The artist was a master of the craft of limning, and had even produced a treatise on the art in about 1600, *The Arte of Limning*. His ability had been developed throughout apprenticeships and years of practice, having originally been a Goldsmith's apprentice in

London. The year after these miniatures were produced, he would travel to France, where he would paint for the French court.

The size of the miniatures was not an unlikely feat for such a brilliant limner and remains one of the smallest extant examples of Hilliard's work. However, their size does not only relate to the artist's skill. It has been suggested that Dudley commissioned these miniatures as a love token to the Queen, and therefore that their size was to add to their intimate purpose[1]. It is possible that they were originally set into a piece of jewellery, much like the 'Gresley Jewel' or the 'Drake Jewel', both of which were also created by Hilliard. Though they cannot be called a complete pair[2] because they face the same way, and not towards each other as pairs traditionally do, the similarity in the styles of the miniatures suggests that they were intended to be together. Dudley had also commissioned other sets of companion portraits, like this one, of him and the Queen. One of these is a pair of companion drawings by Zuccaro, also from 1575, now held in the British Museum, London.

At this point in Elizabeth's reign, she was enjoying relative stability. Only a few years before the creation of this portrait she had been faced with a decision about the life of Mary, Queen of Scots. This stability, however, did not change her decision on marriage. In fact, in the years leading up to the creation of the miniature, Elizabeth had rejected a proposal by Dudley. In 1575, she made her last trip to Dudley's home, Kenilworth Castle, staying there for 19 days[3]. This retreat, however, did not change her mind. By 1578, Dudley and the Queen were still not married, and this pushed the former to get married in secret, much to the Queen's anger. Despite this rocky future to come for the couple, however, these miniatures remain a token of their love. One can only imagine that, given their size, they would have been held closely by either of the lovers, small enough to fit in personal jewellery, or in the palm of their hand.

[1] E. Goldring, London and New Haven, 2019, Nicholas Hilliard- Life of an Artist, p. 118.

[2] E. Goldring, London and New Haven, 2019, Nicholas Hilliard; Life of an Artist, p119.

[3] Dr Charles Knightly, Queen Elizabeth and Robert Dudley- The Real Story, English Heritage Website, <https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/visit/inspire-me/blog/articles/queen-elizabeth-and-robert-dudley/>.

Exhibitions

London, Victoria and Albert Museum, Artists of the Tudor Court, The Portrait Miniature Rediscovered 1520-1620, 9 July- 6 November 1983, nos. 185 & 186;

Edinburgh, Scottish National Gallery, Portrait Miniatures from the Merchiston Collection, 23 September - 11 December 2005, nos. 3 & 4;

Philip Mould & Company, London, Art Fund Private View: Portrait Miniatures at Philip Mould & Co., 12 October 2016;

Philip Mould & Co., London, The Milliner, 9-18 February 2018;

Philip Mould & Co., London, Jewel in the Hand: Early Portrait Miniatures from Noble & Private Collections, 12th March - 18th April 2019, cat nos. 3 & 4.

Literature:

- J. Murrell, London, 1983, *The Way Howe to Lymne*, ill figs. 52 & 53;
- R. Strong & J. V. Murrell, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, 1983, *Artists of the Tudor Court, The Portrait Miniature Rediscovered 1520-1620*, p.118, cat nos. 185 & 186;
- S. Lloyd, National Gallery, Edinburgh, 2005, *Portrait Miniatures from the Merchiston Collection*, pp.16-17, 56-7, ill pl. 1A & 1B;
- E. Goldring, London and New Haven, 2014, *Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, and the World of Elizabethan Art*, pp.89-91, 94-96, 100;
- E. Goldring, London and New Haven, 2019, *Nicholas Hilliard; Life of an Artist*, pp.118-121, ill figs. 93 & 94;
- E. Rutherford et al., Philip Mould & Company, London, 2019, *Jewel in the Hand: Early Portrait Miniatures from Noble & Private Collections*, cat nos. 3 & 4, ill. p.34;
- E. Rutherford; L. Henrdr (Eds), Philip Mould & Company, London, 2021, *Love's Labour's Found*, under cat.1, ill. p.27.