THE LIMNER COMPANY



Attributed to GONZALES COQUES (Antwerp 1618-1664) after JOHN DE CRITZ THE ELDER

James VI/I of Scotland and England, wearing a silver doublet, white lace ruff, and a black hat with the 'Mirror of Great Britain'; circa 1635

Circa: circa 1635

Oil on copper

Turned ebonised wood frame

Inscribed on the reverse: 'Gonzales Coques'

Oval, 85mm (3 ⅓ in) high

Although generally considered to be a vain man, James VI/I of Scotland and England did not enjoy having his likeness taken. Sir A. Weldon, author of a work on the Court of James from 1650, said that the King 'could never be brought to sit for the taking of that [picture], which is the reason of so few good pieces of him'.[1] This may be part of the reason that so much of the iconography of James is based on certain 'types' of portraits, painted by artists close to the monarch. In the present miniature, the likeness has been taken from the well-known 'De Critz' type, of which at least 20 full-length portraits are known. John De Critz was Serjeant Painter to the King, a post that he shared with Robert Peake the Elder. James was also known to have employed Isaac Oliver, as his Painter in Miniature, as well as Marcus Gheeraerts the Younger. The De Critz portraits (and versions) are scattered in collections across the world, including the Dulwich Picture Gallery, the Prado, and the Pitti Palace. These full-scale portraits are first recorded to have been painted in 1606.

On the reverse of the miniature, the name of the artist 'Gonzales Coques' is engraved. Coques was known as the 'little van Dyck' for the influence he took from the great portrait painter and trained under Pieter Breughel III. Like van Dyck, he was an Antwerp-born artist, but it is thought that he worked in England between 1635 and 1640, so he may have encountered and copied this portrait of the King at this later date. The robust nature of oil on a copper support means that the present work has remained vibrant and animated, as is usually the case with smaller works painted by Coques.

The different versions of the De Critz portrait type vary, specifically in the jewel that the King wears on his hat, whether this hat has a feather on it, whether or not his shoulders are covered by a coat, and, very specifically, whether his collar has ties falling down from its centre. Looking at these details, it has been possible to identify that this miniature must have been taken by Coques from the De Critz portrait now in the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, as this is the only full-scale portrait which matches the present composition in all these details.

King James wears the hat jewel known as the 'Mirror of Great Britain', which had been created, Strong believes, from jewels held by the Elizabethan court. [2] Other formal jewels include those known as 'The Three Brothers' and 'The Feather'. All of these jewels were pawned off at the end of James's reign. 'The Mirror' was formed of a rhombus made from three diamonds, and a ruby, surmounted by two diamonds. Below this rhombus sat the famous 'Sancy' diamond, which is reputed to have been owned by numerous royals throughout history.

The rest of the King's attire does not go unadorned; he wears a necklace with pearls and what appear to be more diamonds, and from this hangs a George of the Garter, likely to have also been encrusted with diamonds.

King James is predominately remembered in popular culture for his scandalous behaviour within his court. He had numerous 'favourites' who rose to gain extraordinary power and privilege at court, sometimes well beyond their abilities. The son of Mary, Queen of Scots, he became King of Scotland in 1567 when his mother was forced to abdicate the throne. In 1603 he became the King of England, following the death of his cousin Elizabeth I, who had been responsible for the execution of his mother. As a monarch in both countries, he created a 'dynastic union', a precursor to the political union of the nations of Britain in 1707.

[1] Sir A W[eldon], The Court and Character of King James, 1650, reprinted by G. Smeeton, (London, 1817), pp. 55-59.

[2] Roy Strong, The Tudor and Stuart Monarchy, volume III, Jacobean and Caroline, p. 73.