THE LIMNER COMPANY



NICHOLAS HILLIARD (c.1547 - 1619)

King James I of England and VI of Scotland (1566-1625), in white doublet, slashed on bodice and sleeves to reveal black, jewel-set gold buttons, white lace upstand collar, wearing the Lesser George of the Order of the Garter on a blue ribbon around his neck; blue background with gold border, inscribed in gold in the blue background 'Ano Dmni 1609 / Regni 43'

Circa: 1609

1609

4.9 cm (1 $^{7}/_{8}$ inches)

Watercolour and bodycolour on vellum

Later ebonised wood frame

During the twentieth century, the present work was the subject of much debate. It can now be said for certain that this is a portrait of James VI & I by the hand of Nicholas Hilliard, and not by his studio, as has previously been suggested. In 1985, Roy Strong, previously director of both the Victoria and Albert Museum and the National Portrait Gallery, listed the present work as one of the miniatures previously in the collection of the Earls of Leicester. At the time, the whereabouts of the miniature was unknown. It had been sold four years earlier, and would not re-surface on the market until 2013, where it was acquired by the previous owner.

The detailed and unbroken provenance of the present work is rare, and a testament to the fact that this was seen as a treasure by its previous owners. While in the Leicester family collection, this portrait sat amongst others of Royals, the Leicester Family, and even a self-portrait of Nicholas Hilliard. It was only at the turn of the nineteenth century that the miniatures from this collection were split, the present work being part of the 'Penshurt Miniatures' group[1]. Since this time, the miniature has gone through some aesthetic changes, namely in the fact that the frame surrounding the work of art has changed, the present frame being a much more recent, but perfectly suitable, addition.

Hilliard painted multiple different ‘types’ of portraits of James VI/I; three of these can be found in the Royal Collection. The earliest type features James wearing a hat with a plume[2]. The second type, a category which the present work falls into, presents James wearing a ‘falling band’ with no hat, and a doublet with the sash of the Order of the Garter. A third version comes from a few years later and shows the King with an older appearance[3]. Apart from this, and the fact that the king wears a ruff instead of a ‘falling band’ collar, there are fewer differences between the second and third versions than between the first and second.

It is known that King James did not like having his portrait taken. At the same time, the distribution of portraiture was seen as an important method of maintaining relationships and control for royals. It is this fact that explains the distinct versions of the portrait miniatures done by Hilliard. Most probably, James would sit for one of these, every few years, which could then be used by both Hilliard and his studio[4] for replication. Slight variations in the compositions of each version allowed for some individuality in these portraits, often gifted to members of the nobility, despite the repetitive nature of their creation.

Nicholas Hilliard is seen as one of the earliest and greatest masters of the miniature form. He had been employed by Elizabeth I, and upon ascension to the throne, James continued to employ him. This employment was not without competition, and in 1605, Isaac Oliver (1565-1617), his student, was employed as Limner to Queen Anne of Denmark, the wife of James.

Nevertheless, he enjoyed great success within the court and maintained royal patronage throughout his life. His hand is especially apparent through his use of burnished gold and silver throughout portraits, the latter being used to create the appearance of gemstones in the clothing and jewellery of his sitters. This portrait has numerous black ‘spots’ throughout, which would at the time of creation have been silver, which has oxidised over time. Hilliard has also used gold to inscribe the date of the miniature and the age of the King at this time. Given the age of the work, the condition of this gold is remarkable, and the same can be said for the detail throughout the rest of the miniature.

[1] R. Strong, ‘The Leicester House Miniatures: Robert Sidney, 1st Earl of Leicester and His Circle’, The Burlington Magazine, vol. 127, no. 991, October 1995, p. 697.

[2] RCIN 420047

[3] RCIN 420053

[4] For a discussion of the involvement of a studio in the production of Hilliards portraits, see G. Reynolds, ‘PORTRAITS BY NICHOLAS HILLIARD AND HIS ASSISTANTS OF KING JAMES I AND HIS FAMILY’, The Volume of the Walpole Society, vol. 34, pp. 14-26.

Exhibitions

London, South Kensington Museum, Special Exhibition of Works of Art of the Medieval, Renaissance, and more recent periods, June 1862, section II, no. 2213 (lent by Lord de Lisle [sic] and Dudley).

London, Burlington Fine Arts Club, Exhibition of Portrait Miniatures, 1889, case IX, no. 4 (as by I. Oliver, lent by Jeffery Whitehead).

London, Burlington Fine Arts Club, Catalogue of an Exhibition of Late Elizabethan Art in conjunction with the tercentenary of Francis Bacon, 1926, no. 2, cat. p. 52, pl. XX (as by Isaac Oliver, lent by Mr L.

Currie).

Pittsburgh, Pa., Carnegie Institute, Four Centuries of Portrait Miniatures from the Heckett Collection, 1954, no. 28.

Philip Mould & Company, London, Jewel in the Hand: Early Portrait Miniatures from Noble & Private Collections, 12 March - 18 April 2019, no. 8.

Literature:

G. C. Williamson, The History of Portrait Miniatures, London, 1904, I, p. 33, illustrated pl. VII, no. 4 (as King James I by Isaac Oliver, one of the five 'Penshurst' Miniatures, collection of Mr. L. Currie), II, p. 128.

P. Finch, Catalogue of the Collection of Works of Art at Minley Manor, London, 1908, p. 39 (as by Isaac Oliver), illustrated opposite p. 36.

R. W. Goulding, 'The Welbeck Abbey Miniatures', Walpole Society, IV, 1916, p. 35 (as by Nicholas Hilliard, but footnote no. 9 states attributed by Dr Williamson to I. Oliver).

B. Long, British Miniaturists, London, 1929, p. 319 (as by Isaac Oliver).

G. Reynolds, 'Portraits by Nicholas Hilliard and his Assistants of King James I and his Family', The Walpole Society, XXXIV, 1958, p. 19, no. A.6.

E. Auerbach, Nicholas Hilliard, London, 1961, pp. 157, 314-315, no. 160.

R. Strong, The English Renaissance Miniature, London, 1983, p. 123, note 166.

R. Strong, 'The Leicester House Miniatures: Robert Sidney, 1st Earl of Leicester and His Circle', The Burlington Magazine, vol. CXXVII, no. 991, October 1985, p. 697 ('[as one] of the four authentic Penshurst miniatures'), ill. p. 699, no. 41 (as 'Studio of Nicholas Hilliard').

R. Strong, The Tudor and Stuart Monarchy: Pageantry, Painting, Iconography. - II. Elizabethan, Woodbridge, 1995, p. xiii, no. 137 (as Studio of Nicholas Hilliard), p. 246, ill. fig. 137.

G. Reynolds, The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century Miniatures in the Collection of Her Majesty The Queen, London, 1999, p. 70.

E. Rutherford et. al., Jewel in the Hand: Early Portrait Miniatures from Noble & Private Colelctions, London, 2019, cat. no. 8, pp.48-49.