THE LIMNER COMPANY



NICHOLAS HILLIARD (c.1547 - 1619)

Portrait miniature of King James VI & I (1566-1625) wearing the ribbon and Lesser George of the Order of the Garter, a white slashed doublet with jewelled buttons, a standing collar with wide lace edging, and a black hat with a plume of white feathers and a hat jewel

Circa: 1608

1608

Watercolour on vellum

Oval, 42 mm (1 5/8 in) high

Inscribed by the artist in shell gold, ‘Ano Dm 1608 / Ætatis Suæ 42’

The superb condition of this portrait miniature of King James VI & I places it amongst the finest surviving portraits of the monarch by Nicholas Hilliard to have come on the market in recent years. The crispness of the image, with the bright impasto of the lace collar and braiding on the doublet, belies the fact it was painted over 400 years ago - as the brilliant gold inscription reminds us.

From the moment James acceded to the English throne in 1603 and for at least the first decade of his reign, Hilliard can be considered the King’s primary image maker. Hillard had trained as a goldsmith[2] and it was in this capacity that he is thought to have first been instructed by the King (or by Sir Robert Cecil (1563-1612) on the King’s behalf). He was almost certainly responsible for designing the King’s Great Seal in 1603, which James had approved while he was still *en route* to London from Scotland. Hilliard then quickly set about producing miniatures of James and was seemingly the first artist at the English court to be granted a sitting with the King.[3] Hilliard’s portraits of James are generally grouped into three ‘types’ by date and face mask. This miniature falls into the earliest type, dating from 1603 to circa 1609; other miniatures of this type now belong to the Royal Collection Trust [RCIN 420047] and the Victoria & Albert Museum [accession no. P.3-1937]. Meanwhile, Hilliard continued his multi-disciplinary work, also producing designs for medals and medallions for James. A medal thought to be by Hilliard commemorating James’s peace with Spain (1604) also conforms to the early portrait type seen in these miniatures.[4]

The present miniature may be the latest extant example of the early type and scholar Erna Auerbach (1897-1975) suggested that it is the most confident of the group with ‘modelling [that] is bolder and more articulate’.[5] Visually it appears somewhat of a hybrid between the RCT miniature and the V&A examples, both in terms of costume, background and the inclusion of the gold inscription. This miniature and that in the RCT may have been intended for recipients with a more personal relationship to the King, whereas the V&A miniature appears distinctly more stately. It may be one of the three portraits by Hilliard listed in the Declared Accounts of the Treasurers of the Chamber for payments made in 1608: ‘for his Mats, picture given to Sir Robert Carre 4l. for the Kings and Princes pictures given to the Launcegrave of Hessen and one other of his Mats, given to Mrs. Roper with crystal glasses that covered them 15l. in all...19l’.[6]

In 1608, the year to which the present miniature dates, James’s expenditure reached the eye-watering sum of £1,000,000[7], equivalent to £134,095,600 in today’s money[8]. Hilliard was paid handsomely for his work, but James’s weakness seems to have been jewellery, and the size of the jewelled buttons[9] on the doublet worn here attests to this. In the first 6 years of his reign, James is recorded as having spent £130,000[10] on jewellery for himself and others, which might include the splendid frames miniatures were often housed in. For example, ‘The Lyte Jewel’ [British Museum, WB.167] is a pendant of pierced gold and enamel, bejewelled with 29 large diamonds, which contains a portrait miniature of James by Hilliard.

Both the Lyte Jewel and the present miniature were once owned by members of the illustrious Rothschild banking family. When exhibited in the *International Miniatures Exhibition* of 1912 (Brussels), it was lent by ‘Baronne G. de Rothschild’. The lender must have been Cécile de Rothschild (*née* Anspach; 1840-1912), wife of the late Baron Gustave de Rothschild (1829-1911). Baron Gustave was the first cousin of Baron Ferdinand de Rothschild (1839-1898) who acquired the Lyte Jewel in the 19th century (and later made the Waddesdon Bequest to the British Museum, which included the Lyte Jewel). She was part of a tradition of female patronage in the Rothschild family during the 19th century, whose respective collections have since made sizable donations to French institutions.[11] Whether Cécile herself, or her husband had acquired the miniature, she was clearly greatly interested in the arts: she studied painting and was responsible for the extensive redecoration of the interior and exterior of the couple’s marital home (originally purchased as 3 separate houses).[12]

[2] He was apprenticed to Royal Goldsmith, Robert Brandon (d.1591) in 1562. See Goldring, E., *Nicholas Hilliard: Life of an Artist*, 2019 (Yale University Press), p.63.

[3] Ibid, p.252

[4] An example can be found in the British Museum, reg. 1844,0425.24. https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/C_1844-0425-24.

[5] Auerbach, E., *Nicholas Hilliard,* 1961 (Routledge & Kegan Paul), p.150

[6] Quoted in sale catalogue Christie's, 10-11th July 1984, lot 167, p.47, and Reynolds, *The Walpole Society*, p.14.

[7] Farquhar, H., *Portraiture of our Stuart monarchs on their coins, and medals: in seven parts*, 1906-1915 (Harrison & Sons; comprised of reprints from: British numismatic journal, Vols. 2-11 (1906-15)), Vol. 1, p.165.

[8] Calculated using the National Archives Currency Converter 1270-2017, using the date 1610 (the nearest to 1608) converter to 2017 (the nearest to 2026). https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/currency-converter/ accessed 10th June 2026.

[9] It is difficult to discern what they would have been as the silver paint used by the artist has since oxidised, but

Hilliard used silver in this way to depict both diamonds and pearls.

[10] Cited in Goldring, p.256.

[11] See Baumann, R., 'Rothschild Collectors: Exceptional Patrons and Donors', 21st December 2022 https://maisondelaculturejuive.be/jmag-magazine/collectionneuses-rothschild-mecenes-et-donatrices-dexception/ . Accessed 10th June 2026.

[12] Rothschild Archive online https://family.rothschildarchive.org/people/212-cecile-de-rothschild-nee-anspach-1840-1912. Accessed 10th June 2026.

Exhibitions

Brussels, Hotel Goffinet, *International Exhibition of Miniatures*, March – July 1912, no.840, as 'portrait d'homme';

Victoria & Albert Museum, *Nicholas Hilliard and Isaac Oliver*, 1947, no. 94;

Thos Agnew & Sons, *The Houghton Pictures*, 6th May – 6th June 1959, no. 26.

Literature:

Agnew & Sons, *The Houghton Pictures*, catalogue to the 1959 exhibition, p.25, no. 26;

Auerbach, E., *Nicholas Hilliard*, 1961 (Routledge & Kegan Paul), pp.149, pl.136, p.311, no.139;

Goulding, R. W., 'The Welbeck Abbey Miniatures Belonging to His Grace the Duke of Portland K. G., G. C. V. O., A Catalogue Raisonné', *The Walpole Society*, Vol. 4 1916, p.35;

Reynolds, G., 'Portraits by Nicholas Hilliard and His Assistants of King James I and His Family', *The Walpole Society*, Vol. 34, 1952, p.18, no. A5;

Reynolds, G., *Nicholas Hilliard & Isaac Oliver*, 2nd edition 1971 (Victoria & Albert Museum 1947 exhibition catalogue), no. 94;

Reynolds, G., *The Sixteenth and Seventeenth-Century Miniatures in the Collection of Her Majesty the Queen,* 1999 (The Royal Collection), p.69;

Strong, R., *The English Renaissance Miniature*, 1983, p.196, note 165 (iv).