THE LIMNER COMPANY



NICHOLAS HILLIARD (c.1547 - 1619)

Portrait miniature of a Lady, possibly Elizabeth, Lady Coke (née Cecil; other married name Hatton; 1578-1646), wearing a stomacher embroidered with a Golden Hind or Roe deer and blackwork, her black gown with gold and sapphire jewels, a further three similar jewels in her auburn hair, lace cap and ruff

Circa: circa 1595

circa 1595

Watercolour, gold and silver paint and bodycolour on vellum, laid down on playing card

Oval, 68 mm (2 5/8 in) high

Later ebonised wood frame

This portrait of a wealthy Lady from the mid-1590s is striking for the clear depiction of a hind or roe deer, embroidered over the blackwork of her stomacher. This attribute is clearly associated with the sitter's identity and features prominently against the monochrome stitching. Although damaged, and subsequently later restored, much of the costume remains in good condition, including the jewels of the black dress painted with real gold, ground to a powder and mixed with honey.

The most likely sitter from this period is Elizabeth, Lady Coke (*née* Cecil; 1578-1646), who in the early 1590s had married Sir William Hatton (né Newport; circa 1565-1597). He was a nephew of Sir Christopher Hatton (1540-1591), who had died in 1591 with no children other than an illegitimate daughter. On Sir Christopher's death, William inherited his uncle's vast estates, along with his debts – and took on his name and his crest of a golden hind.

Elizabeth was married for less than a decade when her husband died in 1597 – she was considerably younger than him and still in her teens at his death. While no portraits of Elizabeth Hatton survive for comparison, a portrait of her mother, Dorothy, shows her with distinctive red hair. The golden hind was synonymous with the Hatton family – Francis Drake renamed his ship the Golden Hind in honour of his patron, Sir Christopher.

The Hattons also had close connections to the artist Nicholas Hilliard. Sir Christopher was a courtier and favourite of Queen Elizabeth, and must have known of Hilliard's existence for some years before he painted him full-length in around 1588. This unusual full-length but small miniature was likely commissioned to commemorate his appointments as Lord Chancellor and Knight of the Garter.[1]

Around the time that Hilliard was painting this portrait he was also experimenting with a new scale of miniature painting – cabinet miniatures. Only two cabinet miniatures of women are extant – one unfinished miniature of an unknown lady in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge [209-1961] and one recently discovered full-length of Arbella Stuart (1575-1615) [Private Collection]. Both miniatures display similar fashions to the present work of an open ruff and cap or false hairpiece over the forehead.

Lady Hatton was left a young and wealthy widow after the death of her husband and attracted the polymath Sir Francis Bacon. Reportedly, she broke off their relationship upon accepting marriage to a wealthier man, Bacon's rival, Sir Edward Coke. Years later, Bacon still wrote of his regret that the marriage to Hatton had not taken place.[2]

Her marriage to Coke, led by financial and not personal considerations, was not a happy one. The couple quarrelled over their respective rights to the Hatton estate Elizabeth had inherited from her first husband. It was said the Spanish ambassador Gondomar told King James that Elizabeth refused Coke access to Hatton House (Ely Place) in Holborn. The dispute became so bitter that the king intervened personally to mediate and Elizabeth and her husband were never reconciled: he died in 1634. At his funeral she remarked, 'We shall never see his like again, thanks be to God'.

Elizabeth became friendly with Queen Anne of Denmark, performing in many masques. She had two daughters with Coke, despite their obvious differences. Even this was a cause for disruption in the marriage – with Elizabeth firmly against her daughter Frances marrying John Villiers, 1st Viscount Purbeck, the elder brother of King James' favourite, George Villiers, 1st Duke of Buckingham. Elizabeth opposed the match (presumably because Villiers was generally believed to be insane) and sent her daughter Frances away from Hatton House in Holborn without informing her husband. The marriage went ahead and was as disastrous as Elizabeth had predicted and, in 1621, Frances eloped with Sir Robert Howard, with whom she lived in an unofficial union for many years.

Elizabeth died in January 1646, leaving a sum of money for the parish in Stoke Poges in Buckinghamshire which is still aiding the local community today.

[1] Two versions of this miniature survive – one in the Victoria and Albert Museum [P.138-1910) and one at Belvoir Castle.

[2] Alfred Dodd, Francis Bacon's Personal Life Story', Volume 2 – The Age of James, England: Rider & Co., 1949, 1986. pp. 157-158, 425, 502-503, 518-532.