

Nicholas Hilliard's Portraits of the Elizabethan Court

a hand or eye
By Hilliard drawn is worth a history
By a worse painter made
“The Storm”
John Donne

Nicholas Hilliard (1547-1619) was an English goldsmith and limner best known for his many portrait miniatures of members of the courts of Elizabeth I and James I. He mostly painted oval miniatures of just two to three inches, but also some larger cabinet miniatures up to ten inches tall, and at least two famous half-length panel portraits of Queen Elizabeth, one of which—the Pelican Portrait—is reproduced on the front cover.

From our 21st Century perspective, his paintings exemplify the visual image of Elizabethan England. As an artist he was conservative by European standards, but his paintings are superbly executed and have a freshness and charm that has ensured his continuing reputation as the central artistic figure of the Elizabethan age—the only English painter whose work reflects, in its delicate microcosm, the world of Shakespeare’s plays.

His images preserve the faces of the Queen, Sir Francis Drake, Sir Philip Sidney, the Earls of Essex, Leicester and Oxford, Lord Burghley and other aristocrats. Hilliard said in his book, *The Arte of Limning*: “It is for the service of noble persons very meet, in small volumes, in private manner, for them to have the portraits and pictures of themselves, their peers, or any other foreign persons which are of interest to them.”

Hilliard's miniatures have a jewel-like quality likely because he trained and worked initially as a goldsmith; in fact, they were made to be worn like jewels and set into locket, or kept in drawers, reflecting their nature as romantic keepsakes.

Hilliard said that one of the features of the portrait miniature was secrecy, to preserve faces "in private manner." It is this sense of spying on a private self, an image intended to be seen by one recipient rather than by the world, that gives miniature portraits their fascination. We are allowed into the secret intrigues and passions of the deceased.

For those interested in the world of Shakespeare, Hilliard's visual record of the leading figures of the period are a fascinating way of imagining the English Renaissance—from Elizabeth I to the courtiers who interacted with the 17th Earl of Oxford as part of his social milieu.

By the standards of the flat icon-like Tudor paintings, Hilliard's style was more delicate, slightly better modelled even if still predominantly free of heavy shadow. They reflect the continental techniques which he learned during his travels to France. He painted with more skill in miniature than many contemporary British artists did in full-sized paintings. Further, his pieces were completed in watercolor on vellum, a more difficult medium



Nicholas Hilliard, self-portrait, 1577, watercolour on vellum, in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

to handle than oils because mistakes cannot be easily rectified. Hilliard was an admirer of the great painter Hans Holbein and his delicate technique and wrote that "Holbein's manner of limning (painting) I have ever imitated and hold it for the best." Queen Elizabeth, it seems, was not a fan of excessive *chiaroscuro*.

The typical price for a miniature seems to have been £3—which compares well with prices charged by Cornelis Ketel in the 1570s of £1 for a head-and-shoulders portrait and £5 for a full-length picture. A portrait of the Earl of Northumberland cost £3 in 1586. Hilliard's pupils included Isaac Oliver and Rowland Lockey, but he appears to have given lessons to amateurs as well.

After his return from France, he lived and worked in a house in Gutter Lane near Cheapside from 1579 to 1613. Art historian Roy Strong describes the opening of the shop as “a revolution” which soon broadened the clientele for miniatures from the Court to the gentry, and by the end of the century to wealthy city merchants.

His normal technique was to paint the whole face in the presence of the sitter in at least two sittings. He kept a number of prepared flesh-colored blanks ready, in different shades, to save time in laying the “carnation” ground. He then painted the outlines of the features very faintly with a “pencil,” actually a very fine pointed squirrel-hair brush, before filling these out by faint hatchings. He added to the techniques available, especially for clothes and jewels, often exploiting the tiny shadows cast by thick dots of paint to give a three-dimensionality to pearls and lace. A few half-finished miniatures give a good idea of his working technique.

His style shows little development after the 1570s, while his pupil Isaac Oliver became a competitor starting in the 1590s, having developed a more modern style than his master and being better at perspective drawing, though he could not match Hilliard in freshness and psychological penetration.



The Armada Jewel. A locket enclosing a miniature of Elizabeth I by Nicholas Hilliard, circa 1595. According to tradition, it was given by the queen to Sir Thomas Heneage.
© Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Hilliard continued to work as a goldsmith and produced some spectacular “picture boxes” or jeweled lockets for miniatures, worn round the neck, such as the Lyte Jewel, which was given by James I to the courtier Thomas Lyte in 1610. Other prominent examples of his craft include the *Armada Jewel*, given by Elizabeth to Sir Thomas Heneage, and the *Drake Pendant*, given to Sir Francis Drake. As part of the cult of the Virgin Queen, courtiers were expected to wear the Queen’s likeness, at least at Court. Elizabeth herself had a collection of miniatures locked in a cabinet in her bedroom, wrapped in paper and labelled, with the one labelled “My Lord’s picture” containing a portrait of the Earl of Leicester.

By far the largest collection of Hilliard’s work is held by the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, while the National Portrait Gallery and British Museum own other portraits.