Limnings of Love

PORTRAIT MINIATURES OF THE ENGLISH RENAISSANCE CAN BRING DELIGHT TO MODERN EYES. BY A.M. ROOS

In his poem “The Storm,” John Donne wrote, “a hand, or eye/ by Hilliard drawn, is worth a history.” Two-inch-high portraits by court artist Nicholas Hilliard (1547–1619) continue to make an impact out of all proportion to their size. In June 2007, the winning bid at Christie’s for a previously unrecorded Hilliard miniature of Queen Elizabeth I was £276,000 ($560,000).

English miniatures were first painted in Henry VIII’s reign (1509–47) by Lucas Hornebolte (d. 1544), who was followed by Hans Holbein (1497–1543) and Levin Teerlinc (c. 1510–76).

These artists adapted Flemish techniques of “limning,” or manuscript illumination, and pasted thin vellum to a playing card, which they painted in watercolor. Set in jeweled lockets, limnings were usually private love tokens. Philadelphia dealer Elle Shushan says, “Miniatures are the most personal form of portraiture; they were meant specifically for the ones you loved.” Queen Elizabeth I would pin a locket containing her suitor’s image to her shoe and eventually, he hoped, to her elbow and then her heart. Gazing at a miniature can grant voyeuristic access to private passions.

For Holbein, miniatures were an opportunity to display his ability to reduce his larger portraits to a tiny format, while still giving his sitters great presence. But this skill could backfire, as happened with his charming miniature of Anne of Cleves, Henry VIII’s future bride. Court chroniclers promoted the fiction that royal fiancés fell in love with unknown princesses on seeing their portraits. Unfortunately for Henry, it was true, and when he finally met the real Anne he was shocked, encountering, in his words, a “fat Flemish mare” who, despite her lively wit, couldn’t dance and had hystoiis. Even Holbein’s genius couldn’t save the marriage.

Despite this mishap, Hilliard claimed, “Holbein’s manner of limning I have ever imitated,” though his artistic style was quite different. He and his pupils modeled the faces of their sitters in a delicate “carnation hew” set against a vivid background. Hilliard had trained as a goldsmith, and his limnings are resplendent with gold.

Portrait miniature of Anne of Cleves, 1539, by Hans Holbein, watercolor on vellum.
Nicholas Hilliard, miniature of Queen Elizabeth I (top, left), c. 1595, watercolor on vellum. Miniature of a young lady, age 16, possibly a member of the Strangways family (right), 1605, watercolor on vellum.

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inscriptions and faux jewels created by placing tinted resin over burnished silver. He even described his palette in terms of jewels—“five perfect colours in the world which I prove by the five principal precious stones.”

According to Roy Strong, former director of the National Portrait Gallery and the Victoria & Albert Museum, the revival in popularity of Elizabethan miniatures after World War II was due to renewed appreciation of these lively colors by the art historian Graham Reynolds. Hilliard’s bright palette and his painting of sitting en plein air reminded connoisseurs of Impressionism. Strong argued that the lack of optical perspective in Elizabethan portraiture tied into the vogue in the 1960s for Picasso and primitivism. Recent media focus on Elizabeth I due to Cate Blanchett’s portrayal of the Virgin Queen in the film, “The Golden Age” has made these works fashionable yet again.

Their rarity and high value mean that Elizabethan miniatures are not often for sale by dealers, according to New York dealer Christine Archibald. November 2007, she says, was “an exciting time in the auction arena, since both Bonhams and Christie’s held their Fine Portrait Miniatures sales, and Christie’s had the Gordon Collection of Portrait Miniatures sale.” All three auctions showcased early likenings, including some by Hilliard and his successors at court, Isaac Oliver (c. 1565–1617) and his son, Peter (1594–1647).

As Hilliard is perceived as the premier miniaturist of the Elizabethan age, his works are the most valuable, selling from £50,000 ($102,000) to more than £200,000 ($406,000), according to Camilla Seymour of Bonhams. Further down the scale is Levin Teerlink (£50,000 or $102,000), a lady-in-waiting who limned her royal subject with characteristic “matchstick arms.”
Isaac and Peter Oliver painted in the Mannerist tradition, more Italianate than English, and fetch £40,000 to £60,000 ($81,000-$122,000). Strong notes that works by the Oliveres, though not as fashionable in the market, are often superb in their execution and conception. And the Hilliard name does not always confer magic. A limning by Nicholas Hilliard’s less talented son Laurence (1581/2–c. 1648) sold for £10,000 ($20,000) at Christie’s in November 2007.

In addition to having an identifiable artist, condition is also paramount for miniatures. Alan Derbyshire, head of Paper, Books and Paintings Conservation at the Victoria & Albert Museum, notes that the vellum can delaminate from the card, and miniatures are prone to mold and flaking paint. It is preferable if the frame is original. Sitters with known identity and history are at a premium. Teerling’s miniature of Lord Darnley, the doomed husband of Mary Queen of Scots, realized an unusually high price for this artist’s work—£122,500 ($250,000) at Bonhams in 1997. A portrait of an unknown lady in stylish dress generally elicits great interest, as do portraits with symbols such as painted flames representing burning love or unique emblems such as a hand reaching down from the clouds. Umberto Eco noted in his book *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages* that early connoisseurs, just like modern collectors, “took great pleasure in deciphering puzzles, in spotting the daring analogy, in feeling that they were involved in adventure and discovery.”

There is no better example of this desire for discovery than in Hilliard’s Drake Jewel, a gift given by Elizabeth I to Sir Francis Drake in 1586–87. This gold locket encrusted with gems contained the Queen’s limned portrait and her phoenix emblem of virginity and renewed strength. On the obverse is a cameo of an African emperor and a European empress conjoined, symbolizing hopes of empire. To show his gratitude, Drake had himself portrayed in a life-sized portrait in 1591 wearing the jewel hung conspicuously from his belt. A portrait of love and power, the miniature encapsulated the Elizabethan world.

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