

The Elizabethan Miniaturists

Background Notes

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Nicholas Hilliard, *Self Portrait*, 1577



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The Elizabethan miniature is a perfect and jewel-like miracle. The genius of its execution seems to defy possibility: how can the human hand and eye achieve so much detail at such a tiny scale? This lecture examines the origins and techniques of the miniature and also identifies some of the painters who worked in this medium. Above all, it will explore the work of the greatest English artist of the sixteenth century, Nicholas Hilliard, whose tiny masterpieces have left us a glowing impression of the Elizabethan court.

Techniques and uses

The origins of the miniature lie in the medieval traditions of manuscript illumination but the miniature as an individual work of art, separated from the page, seems to emerge in the early 1520s, probably in France. As with manuscript illumination, miniatures use a watercolour technique and in this period the paint was applied to a vellum ground. Hilliard is at pains to instruct us that this is the pursuit of perfection and all aspects of the work must, therefore, be painstaking and exact. The vellum must be smooth and unmarked, the paint freshly made and clear of all pollutants; the air in the workshop must be pure and the personal habits of the artist beyond reproach. Truly, Hilliard suggests, it is an art form 'fittest for gentlemen'.

In its early days, the miniature was primarily concerned with realism and likeness, providing an intimate image that might be given as a gift between loved ones. It was private, closely linking the giver and the recipient, and for this reason, as much as for its small size, was not an object for general viewing. Miniatures were often presented in locketts or mounted as jewellery to be worn close to the body. Or they could be hidden in small boxes or wrapped in cloth or paper. Secrecy and the excitement of the reveal were part of the appeal of the miniature. As the century advanced,

innovations would move the work away from simple likeness and towards allegory and surface decoration, and there would be experiments with larger scale and different display methods, but by 1600 there was a return to the simplicity and realism of the early days.

Miniaturists of the Tudor court

The earliest miniaturist at the Tudor court was Lucas Horenbout or Hornebolte (c. 1490/1495-1544), who came from a family of highly successful manuscript illuminators in Ghent. He was active in England from the early 1520s and was appointed King's Painter in 1531. He would remain the foremost artist at the Tudor court for twenty years. His portraits are all of members of the royal family and this reflects the elite status of the miniature at this time.

Horenbout's pre-eminence is surprising when you realise that his career overlapped with Hans Holbein's (c.1497-1543). When Holbein arrived here in the 1520s he was an accomplished and experienced continental artist but he had never been asked to paint miniatures. It was not until his second visit to London, from 1532 onwards, that he acquired the necessary skills, and his earliest biographer states that he learnt the craft from one Master Lucas at the English court, presumably Horenbout. Several beautiful and inventive miniatures by Holbein survive. He brought to the miniature all the insights and subtleties of his large-scale work in oil, and also experimented with the traditional composition of the miniature, extending the established head and shoulders pose to include hands and props. Holbein also extended the social range of the miniature and his sitters are drawn from the court and wealthy London society and not just from the royal family.



Hans Holbein, *Mrs. Nicholas Small*, c.1540

Holbein died in 1543 and Horenbout in 1544. The next court miniaturist of note was a woman, Levina Teerlinc (1510s -1576). She was the eldest daughter of Simon Benninck, the leading manuscript illuminator of the Ghent-Bruges school, and she arrived in England with her husband in about 1545. She was appointed royal painter to Henry VIII in 1546 and would become a Gentlewoman of the Queen's Chamber to both Mary and Elizabeth, for whom she produced miniatures. Some of the works historically attributed to Teerlinc are now being questioned but documentary sources record several miniatures given by her as gifts to Queen Elizabeth. Many of these are crowd scenes, whose tiny scale and intricate detail must have been greeted with astonishment and delight.

Nicholas Hilliard

Tradition has it that Teerlinc taught Hilliard (1547-1619) the art of painting miniatures but the evidence is circumstantial and it is clear that Hilliard far excelled Teerlinc as an artist. Hilliard was born in Exeter in 1547, the son of one of the city's leading goldsmiths. After completing his apprenticeship to an important London goldsmith, he worked as a miniaturist and soon established a clientele amongst the court, receiving considerable patronage from Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester. By 1572 he was painting the queen. Hilliard's early miniatures follow a traditional pattern and they still reflect a desire for likeness and realism, with directed light falling onto faces and creating three-dimensionality through shading. These are still real people.



Nicholas Hilliard, *Elizabeth I*, 1572

In the middle 1570s Hilliard spent time in France, where he made good contacts and found new patrons. He also absorbed French styles of miniature painting including, above all, a greater interest in the pattern and texture of clothing, producing an effect rich in surface decoration. This would help to redirect Hilliard's later works, as would increasing competition. The next years included experiments with full-length compositions, with so-called 'cabinet miniatures', with allegorical works and, most characteristic of all, with intensely artificial, two-dimensional and highly decorative miniatures, where the sitters become beautiful, stylised confections, perfected beings rather than real people. It is these miniatures that best represent the extraordinary court culture of Elizabeth's later years.



**Nicholas Hilliard, *Young Man Among Roses*,
c.1587**

Hilliard's surviving miniatures proclaim his artistic genius but he has also left us a written text, now known as *The Art of Limning* (the Elizabethans' word for painting miniatures). It has three main themes: a formal discussion of the theory and status of miniatures; practical information about methods and materials; and (the best bit) a number of personal complaints and observations by the artist himself. The treatise provides a vital insight into Hilliard's work but is also the only known written source by an English artist of this period and contains a unique description of Queen Elizabeth sitting for an artist.

Isaac Oliver

Hilliard ran a workshop and trained apprentices but only one of his pupils has achieved fame. Isaac Oliver (c. 1565- 1617) was French by birth but had been brought to England in 1568 by his Huguenot parents. He was taught to paint miniatures by Hilliard but the source of his wider artistic training is unknown. He may have travelled in the Low Countries in the 1580s and was certainly in Venice in the mid 1590s. His style is markedly more continental than Hilliard's and it is not surprising that he appealed to younger patrons who felt stifled by the isolation and artistic stagnation of the last years of Elizabeth's reign. Oliver's miniatures of the Stuart royal family retain something of the brittle glamour of Hilliard's works but his depictions of 'ordinary' people often signal a return to the original intentions of the miniature, with a renewed interest in likeness and realism. Many of his sitters are flesh and blood, three-dimensional figures formed by light and shadow, their faces rather than their wardrobes beguiling the viewer. Other works show us the wistful melancholy made fashionable in court circles as the old century gave way to a new.



Isaac Oliver, *Unknown Girls aged 5 and 4*, 1590

‘even the work of God and not of man’

The miniature would live on until its intimate portraiture was killed by the advent of photography but it never again held the prestigious place that it did in the hundred or so years from 1520 onwards. For modern viewers, though, the artistry of the miniature still dazzles, the dexterity of the artists astonishes, and the survival of these tiny, fragile treasures defies time and chance. We must surely see the miniature as one of the great achievements of sixteenth century England: ‘even the work of God and not of man’.

Suggestions for further reading:

Elizabeth Goldring, *Nicholas Hilliard: Life of an Artist*, Yale, 2019

Nicholas Hilliard, *The Art of Limning*, ed. by R.K.R Thornton and T.G.S. Cain, Carcanet, 1992

Catharine MacLeod, *Elizabethan Treasures: Miniatures by Hilliard and Oliver*, NPG, 2019

The Royal Collection, V&A, Fitzwilliam Museum and National Portrait Gallery have good collections of miniatures.

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