

## “Elizabethan Treasures: Miniatures by Hilliard and Oliver”, National Portrait Gallery, London (21February – 19 May 2019)

Reviewed by James Alexander

I am no Art Historian, but I know what I like. And I really like Elizabethan miniatures. There is something so fresh and immediate about most of the portraits in this excellent NPG exhibit, a renaissance truthfulness that doesn't reappear in British art for two or three centuries, if ever. An honesty reminiscent of Holbein's drawings and paintings from a slightly earlier period.

First impressions matter, too. Wandering through the exhibition, one is inevitably drawn to the small case of three intriguing miniatures labelled “Symbols and Secrets”. In it is Hilliard's well known “Unknown Young Man against a Background of Flames” (Exhibit 27, c.1600). The portrait also graces many of the posters for the exhibition. It is even more stunning in person as the flames actually do seem to flicker around the “young man” as he poses in little but his



Source: V&A Museum

undershirt, provocatively open low down his chest. He is clearly

burning with passion, despite his cool, direct gaze, so what's the secret? The symbolism arises from the medallion held between his thumb and forefinger, which hangs from a chain around his neck, assumed to be yet another miniature hidden inside the closed case—a secret lover that sets him on fire?

You could be forgiven for thinking the young man was a poet or an actor, whose picture was painted for an adoring fan, or in more modern times, for PR purposes. His passion is further indicated by holding her (or his) image close to his heart. There is a similar picture by Oliver, the c.1610 “A Man Consumed by Flames” shown in Catherine MacLeod’s excellent catalogue accompanying the exhibition (Fig. 34, p.95). Numerous attempts have been made to identify him, too, all equally failing.



Source: Portland Collection

In the middle of the cabinet is Hilliard’s “Unknown Man Clasping a Hand from a Cloud” (Exhibit 28, 1588).<sup>\*</sup> A colleague of mine is convinced, on what seems to be good evidence, that this is a portrait of the playwright John Lyly. The independently refereed paper supporting this attribution is due out soon.

The final picture is the most compelling—Hilliard’s “Unknown Man” (Exhibit 29, c.1616) has a big impact from its tiny “canvas”. The man’s head seems to float atop a wide, flat collar, the style of which will instantly bring to

mind for Shakespeareans the Droeshout engraving of “Shakespeare” on the First Folio. In 3-D, the string descending from the centre of the collar (or shirt) looks so stiff as to be a stick holding up what appears like



a mask. Why a mask? It seems to stand apart from the body, emerging from an elongated neck. The plain black doublet worn by the young man further recedes, allowing the collar and head the focal point.



It becomes even more peculiar when you read the inscriptions. It is dated 1616, according to the script around the rim of the portrait, the year of the Stratford man's death. A modest coincidence, to be sure. The rim also states that it was a "Vere Effigies" (i.e. true likeness) of the sitter when he was 20, but it doesn't specify whether the sitter was 20 in 1616 or at some earlier time. Normally, in miniatures that give the age of the sitter and the year of the portrait, they are one and the same, but here it is ambiguous. In a "Symbols and Secrets" world one cannot take such things at face value.

Source: V&A Museum

The mystery is deepened by the motto in gold lettering delicately painted around the upper curve of the miniature, including a symbol of a sun: "Encore Un [then the sun or star symbol] Luit pour moy". The author of the catalogue entry, CJ Faraday, suggests that it can be translated as "still one star shines for me" or equally, and more suggestively "another star shines for me."

In my own and others, experience, "the mask" jumps out first and only then is the accompanying text read. And it fits in so well with the image. I am curious to know if others have had a similar reaction...?

Adding to the symbology of the “mask” miniature is the black string wrapped around the man’s wrist with a ring attached to it. Such strings and rings suggest a romantic attachment with another.

Whose is the hand holding the stick of the mask, as it seems disembodied from the male figure. The hand is described in the catalogue as “blue-veined”. Does this mean blue-blooded? Perhaps. Is it a woman’s hand? Possibly. I tried in vain to compare it with other hands in other miniatures, but there are few. (The most memorable portrait featuring a hand is the centre one, mentioned above, coming from the sky or cloud). There are a range of views on whether this hand is a woman’s, possibly even Queen Elizabeth’s—but no consensus.

There are a host of possibilities. I would like to think it is a woman’s hand, possibly Mary Sidney Herbert, Countess of Pembroke’s hand, holding a picture of the young man from Stratford who was perhaps the front for the author of the canon, so the motto would mean that he (Shakespeare) ‘shone for me’ as I could not be seen as the author of the poems, sonnets and plays.

Or, it could be Mary Sidney Herbert still holding the candle, to mix metaphors slightly, for her adored elder brother, Philip Sidney. But then there is the statement around the rim about the “Vere Effigies” which seems overly obvious. Is it referring to Edward de Vere? But it doesn’t resemble other known portraits of De Vere. And who would have produced the miniature in 1616 when De Vere was dead and gone? The word “Quadregessimo” also appears on the rim before the date 1616. The catalogue says that this could mean the 40th day of 1616. In Florio’s Italian-English dictionary Quadregesimo (one “s”) is said to be the “fortieth number”; “Quadregesima” (one “s” and ending in “a”) is said to be the time of Lent. This would be, usually, in April, the month of De

Vere's birth. But 40 days from the New Year, March 25th in 1616, brings us to the early days of May. Nevertheless, both four and 40 are numbers associated with De Vere. The catalogue entry does state that the portrait was long thought to be Henry Carey, the 2nd Earl of Monmouth, who was 20 in 1616. However, it also says that it is not very like known portraits of Carey. The mystery continues.

The provenance of the picture is very strong. But it is not often displayed as it is part of the Portland Collection based at Welbeck House in Nottinghamshire, well away from London – and actually closed at the moment pending security upgrades after the theft of the Portland tiara. The picture descended through the Dukes of Portland from the mid-18th Century, but a large chunk of the collections had been brought into the Portland family via the wife of the 2nd Duke, Margaret Cavendish-Bentinck.



Margaret was the heir of the 2nd Earl of Oxford (new creation), Edward Harley. Both he and his father, Robert Harley, were great collectors in their own right, but Edward had also married into wealth, power, and stuff through his spouse, Lady Henrietta Cavendish-Holles. In turn, their daughter and heir, Margaret, married into the Portland family who thus gained Welbeck and the collections (does this include the famous Welbeck portrait of Edward de Vere?).

Margaret, heir of 2<sup>nd</sup> Earl Oxford

If the ownership story is secure, it is admittedly somewhat hard to believe that it is a Hilliard picture given that it is dated 1616, long after Hilliard had painted most of his masterpieces. He died just a few years later, in 1619.

The other standouts in the exhibit, for our purposes anyway, are two cases in the “Love, Landscape and Melancholy” section, each with one similar picture by each of the two principal artists. Four separate young men are shown in a variety of contemplative poses, two upright, two recumbent. Neither of the first two men have been satisfactorily identified. Are they courtiers? Are they poets? Actors? They are certainly very well-dressed.

“Young Man among Roses” (Exhibit 46, Hilliard, c.1587) is perhaps the most famous (often speculated to be the ill-fated Earl of Essex). It is paired in the cabinet with “Young Man Seated under a Tree” (Exhibit 65, Oliver, 1590-5). One could examine at these two men for a long time, wondering what melancholic meanderings possessed their thoughts— certainly it behoved an Elizabethan poet to be melancholy— but also feel soothed by their beautiful bucolic and curated surroundings. The second pair are “Henry Percy, 9th Earl of Northumberland” (Exhibit 66, Hilliard, 1590-3) and “Sir Edward Herbert, later 1st Baron Herbert of Cherbury” (Exhibit 67, Oliver 1610-14). These recumbent nobles are shown against wooded backdrops replete with symbols and allegorical references. Even while their settings and poses cannot be fully explained, they are still calm, thoughtful pictures that invite rumination.

Despite the many gorgeous delights on view, I keep coming back to the “mask” – can the sitter be “solved”? The exhibition lasts until mid-May. Well worth one, if not many, visits. And if you can’t get there, at least buy the catalogue to ponder the bigger questions.