

# THE FITZWILLIAM MUSEUM

## EDUCATION DEPARTMENT

### Fact Sheet

### Miniatures Gallery 32



Henry VIII by Lucas Horenbout  
PD.19-1949

During the Tudor period, miniature painting or 'limning' emerged as a separate branch of portraiture which thrived until it was replaced by photography in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The limner's work became associated with the aristocracy, who could give and receive miniatures as tokens of affection or passion. They were often kept in jewelled or decorated covers made of gold and precious stones so that they looked like lockets. In Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* (c. 1600), Olivia, in love with Viola who is disguised as a man, gives her a miniature, saying: '*Here wear this jewel for me 'tis my picture - Refuse it not, it hath no tongue to vex you.*' Shakespeare exploits the frisson of the miniature as an intimate gift, to be kept secret or revealed.

The Museum holds an extensive collection of miniatures including one of the earliest examples produced in England: Lucas Horenbout's image of a beardless Henry VIII painted around 1526 (PD.19-1949). Horenbout came from a family of Flemish book illuminators and his transition into miniature painting shows the emergence of one art form from another. Manuscripts and miniatures were both executed on vellum made of very fine calf skin and Horenbout's portrait of Henry VIII is painted in watercolour, as were manuscripts. The beautiful border decoration and intricate weaving of Henry's initial with that of the K of Katherine of Aragon can all be traced to the art of illuminated manuscripts.

The portrait marks an important historical as well as stylistic moment in time. It is thought that Henry may have had this miniature painted in response to the gift of a jewelled locket containing portraits of Francis I, King of France, and his two sons which was sent to him in 1526. Henry was clearly not going to be outdone by his French counterpart!

Horenbout is believed to have taught the art of miniature painting to Holbein during the 1530s but he only worked within the royal family. However, in the Elizabethan period miniatures

became more widespread, reflecting a broader spectrum of aristocracy and gentry as well as the rise of perhaps the most famous miniaturist of them all – Nicholas Hilliard.

## Nicholas Hilliard



Henry Wriothesley by Nicholas Hilliard  
3856

Hilliard was born in 1547, the same year that Henry VIII died, as the son of a leading goldsmith in Exeter. At the age of 10, he had been placed in the household of the rich merchant family of Richard Bodley and soon after his arrival the family moved to Geneva to escape the Catholic revival of 'Bloody Mary'. This experience undoubtedly widened his knowledge, particularly of Dutch and German art.

The family returned to London in 1559, once Elizabeth was on the throne, and in 1562 Hilliard was apprenticed to Robert Brandon, the Queen's jeweller and one of the leading goldsmiths of the time. In around 1569 he began work on his own account and by the 1570s he had set up his own shop in Gutter Lane, off Fleet Street. The Queen had her first sitting with Hilliard in 1572 but unlike Horenbout and Holbein, Hilliard did not enjoy a salaried position as court miniaturist until the late 1590s. He was employed when he was needed and the rest of the time had to make his own way. The crown had squandered too much money during and after Henry VIII's reign for Elizabeth to be a direct patron of the arts.

Although Hilliard wrote with bitterness of a life without the 'pension or reward of princes', he never struggled for recognition. His technical advancement was admired by his contemporaries and allowed him to paint the various textures of fabrics, the lustre of metals and the transparent beauty of precious stones more exactly. He also played an important part in creating the image of Elizabeth herself. In an age before spin doctors, his miniatures of the 1580s, during the uncertainty of the war with Spain, show an ageless 'Virgin Queen', framed by an opulent costume- an icon of youth and power. These images were multiplied in the painter's studio and bestowed by the Queen to particular favourites, in an arrangement of jewels and lace.

For Hilliard the miniaturist's art was one that:

*Excelleth all painting whatsoever ... and 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.*

## Technique

Hilliard's treatise, *The Arte of Limning*, was probably written in response to a request for some account of the process from Richard Haydocke, physician, Fellow of New College and art lover, in around 1598. It gives a unique insight into how Hilliard created his masterpieces and a flavour of how he instructed apprentices such as Isaac Oliver, who went on to be a very successful miniaturist in his own right.

Firstly, he would have learned to prepare vellum, 'the best thing to limn on'. This was usually taken from artificially aborted calves to give the thinnest, smoothest surface. The vellum was then pasted onto card to form a rectangular tablet. The card side was then burnished to further smooth the surface.

The brushes that miniaturists used were not as tiny as one might expect. In fact the brushes, or pencils as they were called, were of a decent size but made from the end bristles of squirrels tails so that they had a rounded shape that reduced to a fine and springy point.

Making paints for miniatures required a great deal of skill and Oliver would have learnt to prepare his own colours. The pigments had to be of the highest quality to give vibrant colour and there could be no flaws or lumps in the paint as this would hinder the work. The pigments were ground, washed and strained several times to achieve the finest possible powder. This was then mixed with gum arabic (made from the gum of the acacia tree) and sometimes a little sugar to prevent the paint cracking. The paints were then stored in small shells, with larger shells (such as mussel shells) being used as palettes. Everything had to be kept clean and tidy throughout to avoid dust or dirt getting onto the surface of the picture. Hilliard even advised that silk should be worn whilst working 'such that sheddeth least dust or hairs' and to 'take heed of dandruff of the head'.

Once all preparation work was done, the limner would apply a ground to the parchment. This was a flesh tint called the carnation and was painted to cover the face area. It was chosen to be as near to the sitter's skin tone as possible, but was always lighter rather than darker, as the limner always worked from the lighter tones to the darker.

The red colours were added next, both in shadows and in the 'dead colours'. Dead colour was a term used to describe those tints of lips, hair, eyes, etc. which were the most opaque and least affected by shadow. The blues were added at this stage, to add form and soften the reds.

Next, the hair was painted and any liquid gold or silver added. On some miniatures, black jewels can be seen. These are not jet, but were originally silver laid on to add sparkle to the painting of jewellery. The silver has tarnished with time and so now looks like jet.

In his treatise Hilliard reveals with some pride how he invented techniques for painting jewels. Pearls, for example, required a raised blob of white lead with some shadowing to one side, crowned with a rounded touch of silver paint. This was then burnished 'with a pretty little tooth of some ferret or stoat or other wild little beast'.

## Miniatures of Particular Interest

The following miniatures from the Museum's collection may be of particular interest to those teaching about the Tudors:

### Henry VIII (1491-1547)

**Maker:** Lucas Horenbout (d. 1544)  
**Medium:** Vellum on card  
**Date:** c. 1526  
**Dimensions:** h. 53 x w. 48 mm  
**Museum No:** PD.19-1949



This miniature is the earliest in the Museum's collection and is of unique significance as the first known independent portrait miniature produced in England. Horenbout came to England in the early 1520s from Flanders and soon became a favoured artist with Henry VIII. Although other versions of this portrait exist, only this one has the decorative surround which depicts angels supporting the initials H and K, entwined to symbolise the love of Henry VIII for Katherine of Aragon. Ironically, when this token of affection was being painted the King was starting the proceedings which eventually led to his divorce from Katherine.

### Sir Nicholas Carew (d. 1539)

**Maker:** Attr. to Gerard Hornebolt (c. 1465 - 1540)  
**Medium:** Vellum on card  
**Date:** Unknown  
**Dimensions:** 40 mm diameter  
**Museum No:** 3896



This miniature shows the influence of Holbein, who was working at Court at this time. The three dimensional modelling of the face and the clarity of the light are both found in Holbein's work. Sir Nicholas Carew was a favourite of Henry VIII and held many offices at Court including Master of the Horse in 1522. However, his overfamiliar behaviour led to his temporary banishment from Court and he was later convicted of rebelling against the King and was arrested and beheaded in 1539.

## Queen Elizabeth I (1533 - 1603)

Maker: Nicholas Hilliard  
Medium: Vellum on card  
Date: 1595-1600  
Dimensions: Oval 58 x 45 mm  
Museum No: 3761  
(no illustration available)

Over twenty miniatures of Elizabeth I by Hilliard are now known, all of them showing a youthful and flattering image of the Queen, but varied in the details of dress and accessories. The painting of the complicated costume, jewellery and flowers behind the Queen reflects Hilliard's technical mastery and skill.

## Henry Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton (1573-1624)

Maker: Nicholas Hilliard  
Medium: Vellum laid on playing card  
Date: 1594  
Dimensions: Oval 41 x 32.5 mm  
Museum No: 3856



This is the earliest known portrait of the Earl of Southampton, who was a patron of the arts and a close friend of Shakespeare. He is depicted with the excessively long hair for which he was notorious at the Elizabethan court. In 1601 he was involved in the Essex Rebellion and imprisoned in the Tower of London until James I succeeded to the throne in 1603. A full length portrait of the Earl's wife, Elizabeth Vernon, can be seen in Gallery 3 (Fact Sheet available).