

Helen Hackett

Review of Elizabeth Goldring, *Nicholas Hilliard: Life of an Artist*

According to Elizabeth Goldring in this engrossing biography, the earliest recorded use of the term ‘miniature’ in English literature is in Sir Philip Sidney’s prose romance *The New Arcadia* (written in the early 1580s). Four ladies bathe and splash playfully in a river, personified as male, and he responds delightedly by making numerous bubbles, as if ‘he would in each of those bubbles set forth the miniature of them’. It’s a pleasing image of the delicacy and radiance of the works of Nicholas Hilliard, the leading miniaturist (or ‘limner’) of the Elizabethan age, whom Sidney knew, and with whom he discussed emerging ideas about the theory and practice of art. In some ways a miniature had the ephemerality of a bubble, capturing an individual at a fleeting moment in time, as often recorded in an inscription noting the date and the sitter’s age. Yet it also made that moment last for posterity, as in this sumptuous book, where Hilliard’s subjects gaze back at us piercingly from many of the 250 colour illustrations.

Miniatures were more often referred to as ‘jewels’, capturing their glittering beauty and the way that they were worn on the body, often in cases embellished with gem-stones. Within the pictures also, Hilliard gave minute attention to costumes and jewellery, developing a new technique of simulating gems by ‘laying a ground of real silver, burnishing it to a shine, and then, with a heated needle, modelling the jewel out of stained resin’. Magnified images illustrate this in astonishing detail, and there is more fascinating information about Hilliard’s techniques: playing cards were used as backing for miniatures; pigments were often mixed in mussel shells; paint was applied with a fine brush made of squirrel hairs; and silver was treated against tarnishing with garlic-juice. The ingenious use of recycled or organic materials is highly appealing in our single-use-plastic age, while their tiny scale makes them sound like the kinds of

artistic equipment that Shakespeare's fairies might use. In *The Art of Limning* (c. 1598-1603) – a work blending autobiography, art theory, and practical information on his techniques – Hilliard also warned of particular hazards in such close work, such as 'dandruff of the head', or speaking over a picture and so 'sparkling' it with spittle.

Where, when, and how did he learn his meticulous skills? Hilliard was the son of an Exeter goldsmith, but spent part of his childhood among Protestant exiles in Wesel, Frankfurt, and Geneva, then was apprenticed to a royal goldsmith in London. Goldring points out that goldsmithing and miniature-painting share some skills, but are also considerably different; yet Hilliard's claim in *The Art of Limning* to be largely self-taught is implausible. She surveys a wide range of possible influences, including manuscript illuminations, the early Tudor miniatures of Hans Holbein and Levina Teerlinc, decorative designs for printed books, art and artists encountered on Hilliard's travels, and the 'incomer' artists who sought refuge in London from religious turmoil in the Netherlands and France. Hilliard's art and career are also thought-provokingly placed in relation to the religious iconoclasm of the age, and consequent vigorous debates about the nature, purpose, and value of art.

After completing his goldsmithing apprenticeship in 1569, Hilliard rose swiftly as a professional miniaturist, powered by exceptional talent and zealous self-promotion. In a self-portrait of 1577, aged thirty, he is just as elegantly dressed and self-assured as his powerful patron Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, in a 1576 miniature on the facing page. Hilliard's desire to live and present himself as a gentlemen, combined with unlucky financial ventures and downright financial mismanagement, landed him in recurrent debt. Sources suggest that he did not handle this well, often letting down colleagues, friends, and relations, exploiting his high-

ranking contacts, and lying. Goldring is compelled to admit that her assiduous archival research reveals a less than appealing character.

But the art is glorious, and presents us with a pantheon of the Elizabethan court, most of whose prominent members sat for Hilliard. His most illustrious sitter was of course the Queen herself, who evidently – and understandably – liked how he depicted her, using his services again and again, not only for miniatures but also for the full-scale ‘Phoenix’ and ‘Pelican’ portraits. In *The Art of Limning* he recalled her first sitting, probably in July 1571, ‘in the open alley of a goodly garden’, so that her face would be well lit. Goldring treats us to more close-up images showing how painstakingly he delineated every curl of Elizabeth’s hair and every intricacy of her lace ruffs.

Giving a miniature was like giving a tiny version of yourself, making it a potent token of love or friendship. It could be kept always with you, worn and displayed as a declaration of affection or allegiance, or stored in a cabinet or closet for private contemplation. Some of the most alluring miniatures reproduced here deploy a private language of symbolism: one shows an unknown young man against a background of flames; in another, a man clasps a hand coming down from a cloud. Such encoded images presumably conveyed an intense emotional charge between giver and receiver. But miniatures could also be used to secure the allegiance of a follower, to declare gratitude to a patron, or in diplomatic negotiations. Several of Hilliard’s most eminent sitters, including Elizabeth I, Mary Queen of Scots, and Elizabeth’s French suitor the Duke of Anjou, ordered multiple images from his workshop for such elite political networking. To fill such orders a favoured face-pattern could be repeated, with variations merely to the costume and background.

There is no evidence that Elizabeth sat for Hilliard after the mid 1580s, but her godson Sir John Harington remarked that by now he could paint her from memory. Hilliard continued to produce numerous miniatures of her using standard face-patterns: one which Goldring dubs the ‘mask of queenship’ (c. 1584-91), then one well known from Roy Strong’s work as the ‘mask of youth’ (c. 1592-1603), suggesting the Virgin Queen’s triumph over time and eternal maidenhood. Even after her death, though Hilliard was favoured by her successor, James I, he continued to produce images of Elizabeth to satisfy mounting nostalgia for her reign, and so contributed to her posthumous establishment as an icon of Protestant monarchy. While James found Elizabeth a hard act to follow, Hilliard’s son and heir Laurence had a similar problem with his father’s extraordinary legacy. Laurence was a better businessman than his father, but sadly a dud as a miniaturist. Goldring relates that in 1621, two years after his father’s death, ‘he took the extraordinary step of hiring four men to attack him in Fleet Street, apparently in the hope that, by falsely claiming to have suffered permanent injury to his hands, he might then be relieved of his duties as royal limner.’

Even within his lifetime, Hilliard became an emblem of national pride, as various English writers compared him with Michelangelo or Raphael. Donne enthused that ‘a hand, or eye / By Hilliard drawn, is worth an history, / By a worse painter made’, and Goldring herself makes a convincing case for Hilliard as the greatest English artist of his age. Her engaging account of his life, character, and artistic methods, supported by gorgeous illustrations and illuminating new archival discoveries, makes a wonderful book, at once authoritative and full of pleasures.