

News Release

NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY STAGES THE FIRST MAJOR EXHIBITION OF TUDOR PORTRAIT MINIATURES FOR OVER 35 YEARS

Elizabethan Treasures: Miniatures by Hilliard and Oliver, 21 February - 19 May 2019



(from left): Sir Walter Raleigh by Nicholas Hilliard, c. 1585 © National Portrait Gallery, London; Anne of Denmark by Isaac Oliver, c. 1612 © National Portrait Gallery, London.

Elizabethan Treasures: Miniatures by Hilliard and Oliver, is the first major exhibition of Tudor and Jacobean portrait miniatures in the UK for over 35 years. The exhibition includes new discoveries, as well as portraits on public display for the first time in over three decades. It brings together key images from major public and private collections, including the National Portrait Gallery, the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) and the Royal Collection, to explore the work of the most skilled artists of the period, Nicholas Hilliard (1547 – 1619) and Isaac Oliver (c.1565 – 1617). The exhibition also marks 400 years since Hilliard's death.

The exquisitely beautiful and astonishingly intricate portrait miniatures of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries are recognised today as among the greatest of all works of art to have been produced in England. Hilliard, an Englishman from Devon and Oliver, from a Huguenot refugee family, were compared by their contemporaries to Michelangelo and Raphael, and gained international fame and admiration. The exhibition explores what their miniatures reveal about identity, society and visual culture in Elizabethan and Jacobean England. Termed 'limnings' at the time, with their roots in manuscript illumination, miniatures were prized by monarchs, courtiers and the rising middle classes as a means of demonstrating favour, showing loyalty and expressing close relationships. They could

be set into ornate jewelled cases and worn around the neck, pinned to clothing or secretly concealed as part of elaborate processes of friendship, love, patronage and diplomacy.

Described by Hilliard as 'a thing apart from all other painting or drawing', miniature painting was regarded as a particularly refined and expressive art form, capturing, in the words of Hilliard, 'those lovely graces, witty smilings, and those stolen glances which suddenly like lightning pass', as well as the rich and elaborate costumes and jewellery of the time. These tiny portraits, many in exceptional condition, bring their sitters before us, four hundred years after they were painted, with astonishing freshness and vivacity. In the words of a later commentator, 'The art of the master and the imitation of nature are so great... that the largest magnifying glass only calls out new beauties.'



(from left): **Queen Elizabeth I** by Nicholas Hilliard, 1572 © National Portrait Gallery, London; **Unknown man against a background of flames** by Nicholas Hilliard, c.1600. Purchased with the assistance of the Murray Bequest © Victoria & Albert Museum; **An Allegory** by Isaac Oliver, 1590-95 © Statens Museum for Kunst – National Gallery of Denmark

A large section of the exhibition is devoted to Hilliard and Oliver's portraits of Elizabeth I, as well as images of James I, his wife Anne of Denmark and his three children Henry, Elizabeth and Charles (later Charles I). Miniatures of some of the most famous figures of the day, including Sir Walter Raleigh and Sir Francis Drake, are displayed along with some of the most evocative and well-known works of the period, including the beautiful *Young Man among Roses* by Hilliard and Hilliard's *Unknown Man against a Background of Flames*, both on loan from the V&A. Little-known images include a dashing portrait of Shakespeare's patron, the Earl of Southampton.

A previously unknown portrait of King Henri III of France (1551-89) by Nicholas Hilliard will be on display for the first time since its discovery. A superbly preserved work, it is a rare survival of an image of Henri III. It was almost certainly painted by Hilliard from life, while the artist was in France from late 1576 until late 1578. Henri III was the third-surviving son of Henri II and his queen, Catherine de Médicis, and at one time a possible suitor for Elizabeth I. He inherited the throne at the age of twenty-three in 1574 and was killed in 1589, the last of the Valois kings of France.

Dr Nicholas Cullinan, Director, National Portrait Gallery, London, said: "I am delighted we are able to stage this major exhibition celebrating Hilliard and Oliver's jewel-like portrait miniatures from the courts of Elizabeth I and James I. These intricate works represent the pinnacle of British art in this period and Hilliard and Oliver were exceptional artists, creating vivid character and individuality with a few elegant strokes of a tiny brush, or a complex surface of minute coloured dots."

Catharine MacLeod, Senior Curator of Seventeenth-Century Portraits and Curator of *Elizabethan Treasures: Miniatures by Hilliard and Oliver* said: "I am thrilled to be able to bring together the masterpieces of Nicholas Hilliard and Isaac Oliver in this major new exhibition. These miniatures not only display the artists' astonishing technical

ability, but they also express in a unique way many of the most distinctive and fascinating aspects of court life in this period: ostentatious secrecy, games of courtly love, arcane symbolism, a love of intricacy and decoration.”

Elizabethan Treasures: Miniatures by Hilliard and Oliver is curated by Catharine MacLeod, Senior Curator of Seventeenth-Century Portraits, National Portrait Gallery, London.

PUBLICATIONS

Elizabethan Treasures: Miniatures by Hilliard and Oliver is accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue, featuring over 100 beautifully reproduced miniatures. The book, which includes an introductory essay by exhibition curator Catharine MacLeod, explores what the portrait miniature reveals about identity, society and visual culture in Elizabethan and Jacobean England. Priced at £35

Elizabethan Treasures: Miniatures by Hilliard and Oliver, 21 February - 19 May 2019 at the National Portrait Gallery, London www.npg.org.uk

Tickets without donation £10

Tickets with donation £12

Free for Members and Patrons

npg.org.uk/elizabethantreasures

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Notes to Editors

Nicholas Hilliard (1547-1619) trained as a goldsmith and became an outstanding painter of portrait miniatures, the first notable English-born artist in this medium. He was a key figure in creating the visual imagery of Elizabeth I, producing many miniatures, as well as oil paintings, seal designs and medals. Elizabeth I appointed him her official limner, or miniature painter, a service to the monarch that he continued after the accession of James I in 1603.

Isaac Oliver (c.1565 – 1617) was born in Rouen, France and came to England with his family as a Huguenot refugee. He learnt the art of miniature painting from Nicholas Hilliard but unlike Hilliard, and as a result of his understanding of continental art, he used light and shade (chiaroscuro) to develop a softer, more illusionistic style. Oliver was appointed miniaturist to Anne of Denmark, wife of James I, and later worked for their eldest son Henry, Prince of Wales.

National Portrait Gallery, St Martin's Place WC2H 0HE, opening hours Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Saturday, Sunday: 10.00 – 18.00 (Gallery closure commences at 17.50) **Late Opening:** Friday: 10.00 – 21.00 (Gallery closure commences at 8.50pm) **Nearest Underground:** Leicester Square/Charing Cross **General information:** 0207 306 0055 **Recorded information:** 020 7312 2463 **Website** www.npg.org.uk