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- 1 The lives, scandals, and passions of the Tudors have fascinated the general public for a long time and have been the recurring object of exhibitions in Great-Britain and abroad over the past few years.¹ Although the National Portrait Gallery's latest exhibition tackles the Renaissance period, the originality and the appeal of *Elizabethan Treasures: Miniatures by Hilliard and Oliver* are that it makes the conscious decision to shift the focus from a troubled royal dynasty to the artistic and cultural practices of the late 16th and early 17th centuries – in order to celebrate the 400th anniversary of Hilliard's death, it sets aside Flemish large-scale portraiture and concentrates on one of the earliest English traditions of painting: the art of limning.
- 2 Of diplomatic, political or sentimental values, miniatures were a vital means of representation in Elizabeth I's England. These small portraits, often encased in a jewel setting, have existed at the English court since the reign of Henry VIII,² but it is only during the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods that their production flourished, largely thanks to the incredible body of work produced by Nicholas Hilliard and one of his students, Isaac Oliver. The son of a Protestant goldsmith from Exeter, Hilliard spent some time on the Continent, where he was met with the extraordinary opportunity to become acquainted with different forms of art, including the works of Albrecht Dürer when he was just a young boy.³ As he trained with the Goldsmith's Company upon his return, it is presumed that he simultaneously started to teach himself how to paint – later describing his talent for portraiture in his *Treatise Concerning the Arte of Limning* (c. 1600) as a divine gift.⁴ The patronage of Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, eased his introduction to the upper strata of the English society, eventually making him one of the most renowned artists in the country and allowing him to develop his studio and take apprentices – among them, Isaac Oliver. We find eerie similarities between the life of the master and that of his student, as both were sons of goldsmiths, who became

miniaturists for the court and the royal families, although they each developed their own styles. If we mostly remember the royal representations they created, and most famously Hilliard's depiction of Elizabeth I's 'Mask of Youth,' the exhibition curated by Catharine MacLeod tries to show the wide range of sitters, symbolisms, or even significances that these miniatures could have. By showcasing so many different examples of portrait miniatures – from the royal family to unknown merchants, from a simple physical representation to that of an indecipherable riddle –, it aims at broadening our knowledge of the social and cultural practices of the time.

- 3 It may seem that the public display of dozens of miniatures goes against the very nature and essence of these objects. The portraits, produced on such a small scale, were most often meant to be hidden from sight, between the folds of clothes or in a cabinet room, the tangible evidence of a relationship between sitter and owner. However, the dark colours and dim lighting of the rooms contribute both to bring out the golden settings and deep blue of the miniatures, as well as to recreate some of the intimacy and secrecy that we associate with them. Moreover, the magnifying glasses provided by the museum offer the viewers the possibility to familiarise themselves with the delicacy of the painters' brushstrokes and the details of every face and costume depicted, in an attempt to make up for the physical handling normally required to get acquainted with such tiny objects.
- 4 Today, about two hundred miniatures are attributed to Hilliard, and it is assumed that many more were lost overtime, attesting to the prominence of both the painter and the medium he chose to work on.⁵ The success of miniatures at that period owed to the mastery of Hilliard and Oliver, as well as to the innovations they thought of, both helped by their training as goldsmiths, and their pioneering techniques are put at the forefront of the exhibition. From the very first room they step in, the visitors are not simply left to gaze at and admire works depicting Hilliard and his family, but they find themselves marvelling at the fastidious craft that is limning. An array of utensils and materials used by the limners are set on a table below a video produced by the Victoria and Albert Museum, which takes its viewers step by step through the painstaking process that goes into the production of miniatures, creating a new layer of admiration for the work of the two men celebrated by the museum. From the use of burnished silver to depict gemstones to the introduction of a red curtain in the background of the miniature, both artists played with the tools of craftsmanship to produce miniatures of a whole new quality.⁶ The coins and medals, the large-scale portraits as well as the drawings and writings of Hilliard and Oliver exhibited in the following rooms help to complete the portraits of two men, whose rivalry seemed to lead to bursts of creativity, whose talents were not limited to one medium but thrived as they experimented with different techniques.
- 5 Gathering items from museums as well as from private collections, *Elizabethan Treasures* displays the numerous facets of England in the late 16th and early 17th centuries: it showcases a world made up by kings, queens, and their courtiers, but also by members of the gentry and of an increasingly prosperous middle-class.⁷ Despite their different backgrounds, educations, or wealth, it seems that they shared a visual language and specific cultural practices. Although the representations of the middle-class were simpler in conception, and encased in less lavish settings, their very existence informs us of a process of emulation from one stratum of the English society to another: patronage of limners might have started in the upper strata, with men such as Robert

Dudley, Earl of Leicester, who commissioned many portraits of himself and other courtiers, but many miniatures produced from the 1580s into the Jacobean period allow the viewers to meet merchants, tradesmen, and other anonymous members of the English society. Many of them were actually immortalised by Isaac Oliver, who only came into contact with the royals in the later years of his career. Oliver's attention to detail and his mastery of the brush created vivid depictions of adults and children, giving character and dignity to a category of people who were often coming into contact with painted art and portraiture for the first time.

- 6 Although royal portraiture is not the only focus of *Elizabethan Treasures*, it does underline the importance both of the figure of the monarch and of the relationship between the sovereign and the painter. In the complicated context of Protestant iconoclasm, secular images and representations of the people governing the English society increasingly gained in meaning and in value. Even though he was never officially appointed Serjeant Painter, Nicholas Hilliard had a privileged position at the court of both Elizabeth I and James I. The examples of miniatures featured at the National Portrait Gallery are pieces of evidence of the numerous sittings that took place over the course of the two monarchs' reigns. The steps that led to the creation of Hilliard's famous 'Mask of Youth' are charted through a number of small and large-scale representations, showing how the queen was transformed from a plain young woman⁸ into an ageless icon, whose portrait could be worn as a sign of favour and loyalty. Oliver, on the other hand, did not confine himself to conventions and produced daring portraits, such as *Elizabeth I* (1589), which shows the lines of the face of an ageing queen, thus going against the myth of the divine and ageless Bess.
- 7 If Hilliard was a great portraitist, as his miniatures and large-scale works – including a coronation portrait (1600) – show, Oliver, who was familiar with foreign influence, both from growing up in Rouen and Geneva and, later, from his travels, also produced larger cabinet miniatures, whose size allowed for a more elaborate background, as well as histories and allegories, such as *Elizabeth I and the Three Goddesses* (1588), in which he reworked the myth of the Judgement of Paris. Thus, his prominence at the Stuart court probably helps to explain the diversity of images produced under James I. Moreover, as he understood the importance of dynasty and succession, the new king's family was portrayed on numerous occasions. Thus, the final section of the exhibition, which is dedicated to the Jacobean period, displays more colourful and elaborate works, commemorating the masques played at the court and the intricate costumes that were worn as well as very flattering portraits of the young Prince Henry, that were undoubtedly sent abroad as marriage negotiations were conducted.
- 8 By focusing solely on the works of two of the first English artists, Nicholas Hilliard and Isaac Oliver, *Elizabethan Treasures* manages to paint a broad picture of the English society during the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods. It presents portraits of different members of the English society – some anonymous and from the middle-class, others more famous and belonging to the elite – while also showing the range of the painters' abilities, as they were able to adapt their techniques to different media and different commissions. Beyond the aesthetic qualities of the limnings, the pieces showcased and the few section labels available to read provide information on a cultural phenomenon at its peak, and offer an insight into the social, political, and artistic values of Hilliard's and Oliver's miniatures.

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NOTES

1. To name but a few: *Elizabeth* (1 May-14 September 2003, National Maritime Museum, London), *Elizabeth I and her People* (10 October 2013-5 January 2014, National Portrait Gallery, London), *Les Tudors* (18 March-19 July 2015, Musée du Luxembourg, Paris).

2. See Elizabeth Goldring, *Nicholas Hilliard: Life of an Artist* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 2019) 3.

3. See Goldring 44-50.

4. See Goldring 63.

5. See Catherine MacLeod, *Elizabethan Treasures* (London: National Portrait Gallery, 2019) 10.

6. See MacLeod 22-26.

7. See MacLeod 125.

8. See Nicholas Hilliard, *Elizabeth I* (1572, London: National Portrait Gallery) which is the earliest known miniature of the queen painted by Hilliard.

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