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Revue TIES

5 | 2021

*Pouvoirs de l'Image,
Affects et Émotions*

“Amorous of their strokes”: The Power of Lustre in Nicholas Hilliard’s “Phoenix Portrait” of Elizabeth I (c. 1575)

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RÉSUMÉ. L’analyse renouvelée du portrait « au phénix » entamée en 2005 a permis d’identifier avec certitude la main de Nicholas Hilliard dans le désormais célèbre portrait d’Élisabeth I^e (c. 1575). Bien que le tableau visible à la National Portrait Gallery de Londres porte la trace de plusieurs mains, il est désormais acquis que Hilliard a fourni le modèle de dessin pour le visage de la reine (un modèle utilisé dans d’autres tableaux composés à une période proche) et a lui-même peint l’ensemble des ornements, soit les cheveux, les perles et le bijou en forme de phénix. Le rendu éblouissant des bijoux doit beaucoup à la pratique de Hilliard en tant que miniaturiste. C’est cet aspect du tableau qui, en réalité, confère à la reine l’illusion de la vie et son énergie visuelle, démontrant par là la capacité de l’artiste à susciter l’émotion. À l’appui de preuves matérielles/internes et textuelles/internes, le présent article interroge les termes matériels qui confèrent aux bijoux créés par Hilliard leur pouvoir de fascination.

ABSTRACT. Renewed analysis of the “Phoenix” portrait started in 2005 led to the secure identification of Nicholas Hilliard’s hand in this famous picture of Elizabeth I (c. 1575). Although the portrait now kept at the National Portrait Gallery in London bears the traces of several hands, it is now known for certain that Hilliard was responsible for the provision of the face pattern (used in this picture and others) as well as the painting of all ornaments including the hair, pearls and phoenix jewel. The striking rendering of the jewels in particular owes a lot to his background in miniature painting. This is in fact what bestows most liveliness and energy upon the picture and the Queen, therefore exemplifying the moving power of the limner’s hand, even when adapted to greater formats. Using material/internal and textual/external evidence, the present paper offers an inquiry into the making of Elizabeth’s enduring pictorial aura through Hilliard’s hand.

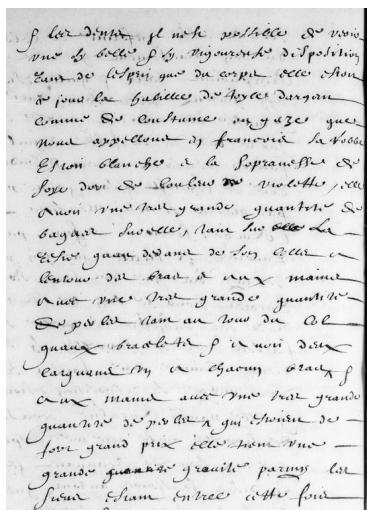
MOTS CLÉS : Portrait au phénix, Nicholas Hilliard, bijoux, perles, enargeia, miniature

KEYWORDS: *Phoenix portrait, Nicholas Hilliard, jewels, pearls, enargeia, limning*

Introduction: Dazzling Impressions

In a chapter entitled “Queen Elizabeth: Studded with Costly Jewels,” cultural historian Susan Vincent explains how the many portraits that were made of Elizabeth I offer a sparkling gallery of the remarkable number of jewels owned by “the most bejewelled monarch ever seen” in the history of England (Vincent 137). We know from visiting foreigners’ accounts as well as from inventories or daybooks kept by ladies-in-waiting that Elizabeth commonly sported so many pieces of jewellery that she would often shed ornaments during the day like “some perambulating Christmas tree” (Arnold 192). One telling example of the strong impression which the Virgin Queen’s lavish display of jewellery made upon her visitors is the minute description found in the journal of André Hurault, Monsieur de Maisse, Catholic ambassador of King Henri IV of France, dated 31 December 1597 [Figure 1]:

Elle estoit ce jour-là habillée de toile d'argent comme de coustume, ou gaze, que nous appelons en François; sa robe estant blanche et la saponnelle de soye d'or de couleur violette. Elle avoit une très-grande quantité de bagues sur elle tant sur la tête qu'au-dedans de son collet, à l'entour des bras et aux mains, avec une très-grande quantité de perles, tant autour du col qu'en bracelets, et avoit deux carcans, un à chaque bras, qui estoient de fort grand prix.¹ (Hurault de Maisse fol. 270v.)



[Figure 1] An excerpt from André Hurault de Maisse’s embassy journal, including a description of Elizabeth I’s jewels, dated from the last day of 1597 (*Ambassade*, fol. 270v.)

¹ The passage is translated as follows in the 1931 English edition of the French ambassador’s journal: “This day she was habited, as is her custom, in silver tissue or ‘gauze’: her robe was white and the overvest of gold and silk of violet colour. She wore innumerable jewels on her person, not only on her head but also within her collar, about her arms and on her hands, with a very great quantity of pearls, round her neck and on her bracelets. She had two bands, one on each arm, which were worth a great price.” (Harrison and Jones 7)

The vast majority of these jewels have been lost over time, and portraits of the queen therefore double as precious visual accounts of some of the pieces in her legendary collection.² The power and value attached to them is perhaps best exemplified by Sir John Eliot's 1626 moving request for a parliamentary investigation, following the early dispersal of the queen's jewels by James I and his son, Charles I:

Would that such a commission might be granted, if only that we then could search for the treasures and jewels that were left by that ever-blessed princess of never-dying memory, queen Elizabeth! O, those jewels! The pride and glory of this kingdom! Which have made it so far shining beyond others! Would they were here, within the compass of these walls to be viewed and seen by us to be examined in this place. Their very name and memory have transported me! (Forster 312)

Eliot's moving "outburst of patriotic fervour" (Scarisbrick 16) conveys rather powerfully the significance and import of the monarch's jewels, far exceeding their sheer mercantile worth and endowed with outstanding symbolic power. The "transports" mentioned by Eliot are reminiscent of how jewels impressed and fascinated those who saw them: "[g]ems and precious metals were things seen by few and owned by even fewer" (Vincent 118). Not only were jewels rare, expensive and mined from strange, distant lands, they were also endowed with extraordinary power.³ I will here be tackling their specifically pictorial agency or *enargeia*. In a presentation of the early modern terms, concepts and practices of emotions, Herman Roodenburg reminds us of the central importance of vividness in *pathopoeia* or "the literal making of emotions where there are none" (Roodenburg 43):

A bit surprisingly, most historians of early modern emotions seem to have missed the central importance of affective rhetoric, but so have most church historians, music historians and even art historians. Yet vividness and its crafting of the viewers' emotions through both their outer and inner senses was a standard notion among all painters and sculptors. Rembrandt van Rijn (1606–69), for instance, wrote about *beweechgelickheit*, referring both to the vividness of the motions depicted and to their ability, through this vividness, to touch the heart of the beholder. He was a master of the art, a true 'pathopoios' (Roodenburg 44).

² In addition to pictures of various kinds (portraits, miniatures etc.), one of the most useful documents about the collection of jewels owned by Elizabeth I is the list drawn up by Mrs. Blanche Parry when she retired as Lady of the Bedchamber in 1587. The epitaph on her tomb monument in St. Margaret's Church in London describes her as the "keeper of her Majesties jewels". The inventory she compiled and passed on to her successor lists no fewer than 628 pieces of jewellery. See the section entitled "A Booke of soche jewells and other parcells as are deliuere to the charge and custodie of Mistris Mary Radelyffe, one of the gentlewom[en] of the Quenes Maiesties privie chambre, al[so]nd[er] were parcell of soche jewells and were in charge of Mistris Blanche Parrye, mense Julii, 1587." (British Library, Royal MSS, Appendix 68, fols 1-37).

³ See Vincent (199 and following), about the powers and legends surrounding jewels at the time.

I will thus be showing how Hilliard's vivid representation of Elizabeth's jewels in the "Phoenix" portrait contributed to expanding the queen's dazzling aura. Although "seemingly hyperbolic and excessive," pictorial depictions of Elizabeth's many ornaments are usually considered to feature items of jewellery "faithfully painted from life" (Vincent 116-117). The magnificent jewel [Figure 2] after which the "Phoenix" portrait is named is therefore only one example among the many pieces which were regrettably lost. Its sophistication, size and startling beauty should not come as a surprise, as it matches some of the New Year's Gift Roll's descriptions of such similarly impressive items, like this gift Elizabeth received from the Earl of Ormond: "a fayer juell of golde, being a phenex, the wings fully garnished with rubyes and small diamonds, and at the fete thre feyer diamonds and two smaller; in the top a branch garnished with six small diamonds, thre small rubyes, and 3 very meane perle, and in the bottome thre perles pendant" (Nichols 66).



[Figure 2] Queen Elizabeth I, "The Phoenix Portrait," associated with Nicholas Hilliard. Oil on panel, circa 1575. 787 mm x 610 mm. NPG 190. © National Portrait Gallery, London

Many of the jewels in Elizabeth's collection came from her father King Henry VIII and therefore took on strong dynastic connotations, as is the case with the

Phoenix portrait which shows the Queen wearing a prominent jewelled collar with a red and white Tudor rose while delicately holding a red rose against her heart with her right hand. The phoenix itself “was also an image rich in dynastic mysticism asserting the perpetuity of hereditary kingship and royal dignity” (Strong 41, see also Doran 178-179).

The political use of jewels under Elizabeth, and more particularly so in the second half of her reign, is of course nothing new or exclusively Elizabethan. Yet “in its quantity and in its type, Elizabeth’s jewellery staked political claims, manifested ties of loyalty and affect with her subjects and court, and decorated the frail, living flesh with glittering magnificence” (Vincent 117). My contention is that the now famous picture says as much about Elizabeth’s power as about the portrait maker’s powerful hand, aimed at arousing admiration and reverence in the viewer. Looking at official portraits without taking into account their very pictoriality and the varying use of materials or techniques from one portrait to the next is overlooking the visual politics at stake on the very surfaces where they appear and in the way they are staged and designed, materially. I will therefore be briefly inquiring into the following three characteristics of the Phoenix portrait. Its size, first, given that this is not the type of format that we most commonly associate with Nicholas Hilliard, then the style and specific techniques used by Hilliard and, finally the way Hilliard’s illusionistic rendering reverberates upon the Queen herself but also on her then “primary painter for portraits in great” (Goldring 113), a dimension often overlooked in Hilliard’s career. In attempting to communicate dynastic power and to “transport” onlookers, Hilliard was at the same time elaborating a dazzling self-promoting strategy for himself as an artist.

Commissioning a portrait in great by Hilliard

According to Roy Strong, the “Phoenix” portrait may have been commissioned by Gabriel Goodman (1528-1601) who, at the time the picture was painted (around 1574-1575), had served for about fourteen years as Dean of Westminster Abbey. Although the “evidence will never advance beyond being circumstantial,” Strong writes, “the portrait must have begun its life on the walls of the Deanery in Westminster Abbey” (Strong 39). Why was Nicholas Hilliard the artist chosen for the portrait? By the mid-1570s, the limner had already acquired quite a strong reputation across the Channel. Catherine de’ Medici, who had been offered a small portrait of Leicester, as was then common in political and diplomatic negotiations, asked for a similar picture “in small volume” of the Queen, now lost. Catherine’s rather specific description of Hilliard’s miniature and her request for another one are attested by a letter she sent to La Mothe Fénelon on 3 July 1571:

Je vous prie me faire ce plaisir que je puisse avoir bientost une peincture de la Royne d’Angleterre en petit volume, de la grandeur (et qu’elle soit bien pourtraicté), et faicté de la façon mesme de celle que m’avez envoyée du dict comte de Lestre, ainsi que vous dira le dict Vassal; car la peinture que nous en avons est du tout en

plat, qui n'a pas si bonne grâce qu'elle aura, estant un peu tournée sur le costé droict.⁴ (De la Ferrière and Baguenault de Puchesse 52)

Although the 1571 miniature that was sent to Catherine is now lost, it may have looked very much like the 1572 miniature which is now property of the Victoria and Albert Museum in London [Figure 3].



[Figure 3] Queen Elizabeth I by Nicholas Hilliard. Watercolour on vellum, 1572. 51 mm x 48 mm, oval. NPG 108. © National Portrait Gallery, London

Hilliard's talent as a miniature portrait maker, and the strong impression he made upon the French court, may therefore partly account for his being chosen to paint the phoenix portrait:

Presumably, Leicester and Elizabeth were so delighted by Hilliard's success in crafting a new royal image in little [...] that they asked him for new royal images on a life-size scale, designed to be hung on the wall and, thus, seen by a wider audience. Nothing is known with certainty of the precise circumstances under which [...] the "Phoenix" was commissioned. (Goldring 113)

These larger pictures, contrary to portrait miniatures, which "are to be viewed in hand," (Hilliard 67) were intended to "be hung on the wall," so that they contributed

⁴ "I pray you do me the pleasure that I may soon have a painting of the queen of England in small volume, of the same size (and that she be well portrayed) and done in the same fashion as the one you sent me of the earl of Leicester, as I already have one in full face, which is not as graceful as this other one will be, with her turning slightly to the right." (*My translation*)

more publicly to visual propaganda:⁵ they were meant to affect and impress all onlookers. Portraits in large had to capture the viewer's attention immediately. This differs markedly from the way miniature portraits acted upon their owner and circulated at court or between courts. Although they served political negotiations as much as more secret amorous or interpersonal purposes, their sheer size did not allow the representation of many power-related objects or ornaments, if only because the smallness of the piece of vellum used as surface could only accommodate the face of the sitter and only a very little part of their attire.

In this regard, the oval format of the 1572 miniature is perhaps no coincidence. Although at the time the oval shape of miniature portraits was mostly associated with the French fashion and Hilliard had up to then favoured the round-shaped portrait, the fact he chose an elongated surface to compose one of his first portraits of the queen is perhaps already an indication that he needed some extra-pictorial space to depict the queen's costly, rich and sparkling effects (see for instance the delicate rendering of her apparel – the flowery and colourful undershirt and sleeves – and her opulent jewellery). The limner's attentive depiction of ornaments is obvious in all formats: in most portraits Hilliard painted of the queen, Elizabeth appears festooned with an extraordinary array of jewellery, as was her wont. Yet it also agrees with Hilliard's own hand and talent, as he was perhaps most successful in the creation of the illusion of lustre and sheen, which he knew would catch the eye of anyone viewing his likenesses. It should thus come as no surprise that in the larger phoenix portrait Hilliard should depict so heavily and beautifully bejewelled a queen: from the hair ornament to the carcanet, pendant, pearl belt and the many pearls sewn into the golden embroideries of Elizabeth's magnificent dress, innumerable pieces of sparkling ornament are vying for pictorial attention with the queen's own bright face.

Establishing the miniaturist's hand: technical findings, stylistic analysis

Close analysis has established that parts of the Phoenix portrait seem to have been painted by different hands, suggesting the portrait was most probably produced in a workshop.⁶ This shows most obviously in the depiction of the ruff [Figures 4 and 5], which was painted in a technique differing markedly from Hilliard's own: "Paint of a much smoother, thinner consistency was used in the ruff of the Phoenix portrait. It is therefore likely that Hilliard had some studio assistance in the production of the Phoenix portrait" (McLeod 54).

⁵ See, "true, adj., n., adv., and int." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, September 2020. [Accessed 3 November 2020.]

⁶ For the most recent findings on the portrait see The National Portrait Gallery's conservation report: <https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portraitConservation/mw02074/Queen-Elizabeth-I> (accessed 23 July 2020).



[Figure 4] The Phoenix Portrait. Detail of ruff (7.1 x mag). © National Portrait Gallery, London



[Figure 5] Detail of ruff in raking light in Nicholas Hilliard's miniature portrait of Robert Carr, Earl of Somerset, showing the thick-bodied paint used for the edging. Watercolour on vellum, circa 1611. NPG 4260. © National Portrait Gallery, London

Conversely, other features and ornaments, including the queen's hair and all jewels, are, according to reconstitution work and technical investigation, typical of Hilliard's hand. Recent dendochronological and stylistic analysis of a large picture of Elizabeth, painted around 1576-1578 (the years immediately following the "Pelican" and "Phoenix" portraits) proved that it had almost certainly been painted by Hilliard as well, something which specialists had assumed yet had had no scientific way of substantiating.⁷ Establishing that the picture now belonging to the Rothschild family

⁷ About this later portrait and recent findings surrounding its date of composition and similarities with the Pelican and Phoenix portraits, see the website of the 2017 exhibition at Waddesdon Manor, "Power and Portraiture"

was indeed painted by Hilliard also means both the “Pelican” and the “Phoenix” portraits – the wooden panels for which derive from the same two oak trees – can now be more firmly associated with Hilliard than they were before.

This was also inferred from the fact that all three portraits share common stylistic traits: from the face pattern used for the Queen (the lack of shadow, the line drawn above the eye, the bony nose and small mouth) to the way her curls are rendered, many elements point to Hilliard and thereby provide a material and stylistic continuum between the 1572 miniature portrait and the pictures in great dated from the following years, namely the “Pelican” portrait, the “Phoenix” portrait and the Rothschild portrait. To go back to the “Phoenix” portrait alone, and to its jewels in particular, they are often mentioned as testifying to Hilliard’s hand in the portrait.

Interestingly enough, what is perhaps most characteristic of these beautiful ornaments is the fact they were treated in the same way Hilliard would approach the depiction of jewels in his miniature portraits. In fact, Hilliard’s skill as limner is undoubtedly one of the reasons why his larger pictures are so striking and life-like. Jewels, and lustrous pearls in particular, are essential to Hilliard’s technique, something which he states explicitly in his *Art of Limning*:

[Limning] excelleth all other painting whatsoever, in sundry points, in giving the true lustre to pearl and precious stone, and worketh the metals gold or silver with themselves which so enricheth and innobleth the work that it seemeth to be the thing itself, even the work of God and not of man. (Hilliard 43)

Technical analysis has now made it possible to reconstitute Hilliard’s technique and in fact we now know that the “true lustre of pearl and stone” is indeed Hilliard’s unique and remarkable innovation. He was the first portrait miniaturist ever to create jewels on the painted surface: earlier miniaturists had most often resorted to representing pearls as flat grey circles highlighted with a touch of white, as is illustrated, for instance, by Horenbout’s typical rendering of pearls [Figure 6]. His miniature portrait of Katherine of Aragon offers a telling instance of how he would make use of a greyish colour for the body and add a dot of white for the highlight.

(7 June – 29 October 2017): <https://waddesdon.org.uk/whats-on/elizabethan-power-portraiture-hilliard/> (accessed 23 July 2020).



[Figure 6] Katherine of Aragon, attributed to Lucas Horenbout. Watercolour on vellum, circa 1525. Diam. 38 mm NPG 4682. © National Portrait Gallery, London

Compared to his predecessors, Hilliard thus revolutionised the depiction of jewels:

Hilliard was a notable technical innovator, developing new techniques to represent the sheen of metals, the transparency of precious stones, [...] Hilliard appears to be the first miniaturist to create jewels using silver and tinted resins. Highlights on his pearls were dots of silver (now tarnished black) burnished with a little animal tooth. He also created gems such as rubies and sapphires by applying appropriately coloured resins over a base of burnished silver. [...] Microscopic examination has shown that the first known use of the resin over silver technique was on *Queen Elizabeth I*, 1572. (Cooper 248)

In other words, the 1572 oval miniature [Figure 3] which shares so many common features with the following greater pictures corresponds to the first time Hilliard worked on what was to become his most widely recognized talent and which would lead him to increasingly develop and improve the stupendous three-dimensionality of his jewels, turning the picture into an even livelier image of his sitters, so “that it seemeth to be the thing itself, even the work of God and not of man” (Hilliard 43). The limner’s very words are here close to echoing Elizabeth’s own increasingly frequent and jewelled claims to divinity. We know for example that she owned a collar inscribed with the Latin phrase *Gemma preciosor intus* (“there is a gem more precious within”) combined with the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, a clear reference to the Book of Revelation, “I am alpha and omega” (Vincent 125). Hilliard therefore brought his limner’s eye and careful attention to the depiction of jewels to his portraits in large. Hilliard’s personal handling of the jewels, contrary to other parts of the picture that he left to assistants, may suggest how crucial he deemed this specific dimension of the portrait.

These stylistic options had strong political resonance, and may have affected the very reception of these pictures. As noted by Louis Montrose in *The Subject of Elizabeth*, Hilliard's distinctive hand in the "Phoenix" portrait proved instrumental in underlining Elizabeth's fundamental difference from her half-sister Mary Tudor (1516-1558) and portraits associated to her:

The Elizabethan portraits are in the highly decorative native English style, and display an affinity with the jewel-like art of the limner or watercolor miniaturist [. .]. This emphatic contrast of cultural styles subtly underlines the contrast between the "mere English" Elizabeth, on the one hand, and her half-Spanish half-sister and the latter's Habsburg consort, on the other. (Montrose 56)

Commenting upon Anthonis Mor's 1554 portrait,⁸ Montrose explains how the more typically continental mode of representation of Mary in the portrait signalled distinct dynastic stakes and political claims. While Hilliard's limning background, deriving as it does from the art of illumination, is often interpreted as a form of enduring neo-medievalism testifying to England's backwardness and late "Renaissance," his "decorative native English style" may also here be viewed or perceived as a striking political statement. Yet within the narrower context of Elizabeth's reign, the reception of the phoenix portrait in the mid-1570s may have triggered more deeply ambivalent reactions and emotions.

Reading the phoenix: mixed emotions



[Figure 7] Detail of the phoenix jewel. © National Portrait Gallery, London

⁸ The portrait is now held at the Museo Nacional del Prado, see <https://www.museodelprado.es/en/the-collection/art-work/mary-tudor-queen-of-england-second-wife-of-philip/acf6ebc4-081a-44e6-974d-6c24acf95fc4>.

The queen was frequently associated with the Phoenix so that the mythical bird came to acquire varying connotations over the course of Elizabeth's reign, as has been well documented. In the opening years of her reign, the phoenix was seen as a sign of the rebirth and strength of the Tudors "as a Protestant dynasty" but by the mid-1570s the "likelihood of Elizabeth producing an heir diminished so" that "the association of Queen and Phoenix became tinged with sadness" (Goldring 113). This was exemplified in a medal dated 1574 that features a bust of Elizabeth on the obverse and a phoenix amid flames on the reverse.⁹ Engraved around the animal is the following inscription: "felices arabes mvndi qvibvs vnica phœnix phœnicem reparat deperevndo novam. o miseros anglos mvndi qvibvs vnica phœnix vltima fit nostro tristia fata solo" which translates as "Happy Arabs whose only Phoenix reproduces by its death a new Phœnix. Wretched English whose only Phœnix becomes, unhappy fate, the last in our country."¹⁰ Goldring conjectures that Hilliard may have supplied the designs for the metalwork, as he was also working on the "Phoenix" portrait at the time (Goldring 113-114). Whether he did contribute to this specific piece is perhaps less important than the intimations of mortality contained in the words surrounding the phoenix. This may have been a reference to the plague which then raged in London and resulting fear for the queen's life, or again to her lack of succession and more general fear for the future of England. This interpretation of the phoenix could not be further from an earlier reference to the Arabian bird appearing in Laurence Humphrey's 1566 Latin oration, which he composed for Elizabeth's visit to Oxford:

Viue, uale, Phoenix, mundi rosa munda ualeto,
Gemma Britannorum, uiue, ualeque diu. (Goldring *et al.* 547)¹¹

The "Phoenix" portrait [Figure 7] does seem to resonate more forcefully with Humphrey's brilliant vision of a jewel-like queen, adorned with a rich and fertile display of roses and pearls. The British Museum's description of the 1574 medal, on the contrary, emphasises the fact that although Elizabeth's hair is elegantly arranged and decorated with pearls, her choice of dress is plainer than usual, a possible hint at the proclamation she issued that same year against excessive ornament. The overall impression is one of greater simplicity and, most importantly, of overwhelming nostalgia and apprehension. Conversely, the sophistication of Elizabeth's dress and ornaments in Hilliard's take on the phoenix is a dazzling show of power. Quoting fragment 316 from Pascal's *Thoughts*, Louis Marin argues that political representations work via a delegation of forces into signs ("Les représentations sont des délégations de forces dans les signes," Marin 75). The fragment by Pascal, which Marin uses as a starting point for his discussion of power

⁹ See https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/C_1927-0404-3 (accessed 24 July 2020).

¹⁰ I here borrow the translation given on the British Museum page for the object (see previous footnote).

¹¹ The translation given by Sarah Knight in the same volume is: "Live long, flourish, Phoenix, elegant rose of the world, flourish long, / Jewel of the British, live and flourish long." (Goldring *et al.* 547).

and representation is about spruce persons who, according to him, should not be seen as “foolish, for it proves that a great number of people work for one. [. . .] Now it is not merely superficial nor merely outward show to have many arms at command. The more arms one has, the more powerful one is” (Pascal 89). The arms mentioned here are those of all involved in the making of dress, jewels, hair ornaments etc. In the case of Hilliard’s painting, one has to add the all-powerful arm of the painter in charge of re-presenting these “signs-effects” (“signes-effets,” Marin 75).

I would now like to argue, in the following and last section of this article, that Nicholas Hilliard seems to have been acutely aware of his own forceful arm and contribution to the queen’s power in composing the “Phoenix” portrait. As he created “lively” details in the picture, Hilliard was magnifying the symbolic force of the phoenix by conferring on Elizabeth the “truly divine power” of painting (Alberti 44), which consists in granting the sitter eternal “life” through the portrait, thereby running counter to the 1574 medal’s intimations of mortality. Alberti, whom Hilliard had read and mentions on several occasions in his manuscript on limning (Hilliard 49-51), is mostly concerned with narrative painting in his *Della Pittura* yet exemplifies this idea of making the absent present with a portrait of Alexander the Great. Joanna Woodall, in a 2019 professorial lecture at The Courtauld Institute of Art,¹² sees in this the illustration of the “mysterious power of a picture to invoke a mysterious presence” and to grant “the faces of the dead a very long life.” I would like to argue that in the case of the Phoenix portrait, the jewels themselves, rather than the face pattern, are endowed with such mysterious power, thereby “communicating the embodied presence of the subject to a receptive beholder” and serving as a lively agent connecting subject and viewer. The “Phoenix portrait” could thus perhaps be read as a *mise en abyme* of sorts, bestowing upon Elizabeth’s personal device (the phoenix) pictorial substance and effect. The phoenix could indeed be read as “a symbol for hereditary rule because, like the institution of monarchy, the generality of the phoenix lives on when the individual dies” (Doran 178). Hilliard’s picture, by allowing viewers to visually experience Elizabeth’s phoenix-like presence across the ages, lives on in a similar fashion, forever perpetuating the queen’s authority.

¹² There is no script for the lecture but it is accessible online <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Akn-DsP5gUk> (accessed 23 July 2020).

The limner's strokes: “O’erpicturing that Venus where we see / The fancy outwork nature”



[Figure 8] Detail of jewelled collar in the “Phoenix” portrait, showing enamelled fruits (7.1 x mag). © National Portrait Gallery, London

Hilliard’s striking and lively rendering of the jewels is in no small part related to his limning skills:

The painting techniques display a very high level of knowledge and skill in the manipulation of oil paint, with striking attention to detail. This is notable in the jewels, where the extremely fine brushstrokes used to depict small fruits and gem stones can be compared to a miniaturist’s technique. (Conservation report)

The limner’s attention to jewels therefore seems to reverberate through his treatment of painting in great, granting life-like quality and liveliness to the whole, enlivening the representation so that his pictures seem endowed with eternal, proto-photographic life. Contrary to his portrait miniatures, limned *ad vivum*, we know that Hilliard used the same face pattern in the “Phoenix” portrait as in the “Pelican” portrait and the Rothschild portrait. Technical analysis has indeed revealed that “a cartoon was used to transfer the design for the face pattern” in both the “Pelican” and “Phoenix” portraits (Goldring 296 n.65) and therefore quite possibly the Rothschild portrait. The sense of “directness” derived from “miniatures executed in the presence of the sitter” may have been slightly flattened in this specific case (Faraday §5).

Vividness was a central tenet in portraiture in general, as exemplified by Alberti’s treatise, yet limning in early modern England, and Nicholas Hilliard’s pictures in small in particular, worked in very specific and powerful ways towards achieving

such effect.¹³ Hilliard's handling of jewels and the technical innovations he came up with were part of this wider conception of portraiture. His obsession with "true lustre" (Hilliard 43; 71 and Dulac 2015) resonates with the "truth of the line," which he writes is "the principal part of painting or drawing after the life" (Hilliard 65). The notion of "truth," so central to Hilliard's conception of limning ("true" is used 25 times in his treatise, "truth" 9 times and "truly" 8 times), serves as a reminder of limning's fundamentally moving quality. The word "true" was then endowed with many different meanings which all seem to be resonating in the portrait. It first denoted loyalty and constancy, a mostly political meaning alluding to Hilliard's respect for his Queen and faithfulness to her pictorial agenda and propaganda. Interestingly enough, it could then also be used about a colour, to indicate it was not liable to alter or fade. This second meaning echoes Hilliard's "general rule that limning must excel all painting in that point, in that it must give everything his proper lustre, as well as his true colour, light and shadow" (Hilliard 71). Given that "the line only giveth the countenance; but both line and colour give the lively likeness," (Hilliard 65) true colours are therefore central to a picture's mimetic power and agency. Only true colours will affect the eye of the beholder in the most perfectly illusionistic fashion.

Finally, for the portrait to be "true," it needs to be executed in accordance with the sitter's "true" appearance: the painter's work must be "so true that it resembleth excellently well" (Hilliard 65). If truth can only be attested in comparison with knowledge, memory or fact, the truth in painting also calls for the viewer's own attestation of sorts, validating the sense of truth in the picture which can only come alive in the presence of a beholder. In other words, the "truth" of a portrait circulates among the sitter, the artist and the viewer. Ultimately, it also becomes a moving image, an emotion-inducing device since the recognition of the sitter's painted presence acts upon the beholder in ways overcoming absence and loss. The picture was not supposed to magically substitute for real presence but rather to recreate a form of experience:

Thereby presence is not recreated, but the experience of seeing what is described. Similarly, statues or paintings do not by their vivid lifelikeness miraculously dissolve into the living being they represent. Instead, they as well excite images in the mind of the viewers that are animated by their memories of similar situations and living beings, and thus recreate not their presence, but the experience of their presence. (van Eck, 55)

Hilliard's portrait of Elizabeth, viewed in such a light, aimed at recreating the experience of being dazzled by the magnificence of the queen's jewels, a metaphor for her own brilliant aura.

¹³ About liveliness and directness in Hilliard's works see Faraday 2019. For a broader account of liveliness in the Renaissance see Hazard 1975.

Although we can no longer directly access early modern viewers' emotions when faced with such experience, we may turn to written testimonies and accounts to try to trace a history of reception. Turning to poetry or text is in fact also a way of acknowledging the rhetorical origin of vividness – *enargeia* in Greek or *evidentia* in Latin, as praised by Cicero, among others. Christina Faraday has recently shown how much Hilliard's own conception of his art hinges upon a rhetorical conception of effectiveness that aims at capturing the experience of immediacy:

[T]he vividness and directness of the miniature is not one of general verisimilitude, rather a particularly immediate – quick – kind of representation: a record, Hilliard claims, of something that “like lightning” passed. Accounts from the period show that our perception of the miniature’s directness is not anachronistic. The responses of Elizabethan viewers suggest that they too experienced a very direct correspondence between the miniature and the person it represented. (Faraday §12)

In the case of miniature paintings, the feeling of “directness” discussed by Faraday was partly the result of the very “process of manufacture” (Faraday §9) of small pictures, i.e. the fact that they most often involved working *ad vivum* at some point. Hilliard even describes his first encounter with Elizabeth in his *Arte of Limning*, along with a conversation they had, something which the reader can sense he was not just a little proud of:

This makes me to remember the words also and reasoning of Her Majesty when first I came in her Highness’s presence to draw [. . .]. Her Majesty’s curious demand hath greatly bettered my judgment, besides divers other like questions in art by her most excellent Majesty, which to speak or write of were fitter for some better clerk. (Hilliard 67)

There was no such sitting or conversation involved in the painting of the “Phoenix” portrait, so that this larger painting seems not concerned with the capturing of a fleeting expression on the queen’s face, passing like lightning, to borrow Hilliard’s own metaphor. My argument is that the viewer is struck by an equally moving (if different) kind of lightning in this greater picture, emanating from the jewels painted:

Now the next perfect colour, which is red: the ruby is the most perfect red, and if he be without blemish, and so great and thick as he may bear the proportion of diamond cut, he flickereth and affecteth the eye like burning fire, especially by the candle light. (Hilliard 85)

Hilliard’s recreation of the jewels’ ability to *affect* the eye “like burning fire” recreates the impression that the queen’s ornaments were known to have upon those who saw her. Although not qualifying as “limning” proper, the efficacy of the “Phoenix” portrait thus derives from Hilliard’s experience and aims as a limner. His fascination with vividness and liveliness seems to have worked quite efficiently as

the word “limning” became increasingly associated with ideas of directness or truth. In this regard, early modern plays offer a most useful record. For instance, the moving sense of presence conjured up by limning resonates quite strikingly through Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*. In Act 2 scene 7, Duke Senior, seeing Orlando for the first time, makes the following comment upon the striking resemblance between him and his deceased and regretted father, Sir Rowland:

If that you be the good Sir Rowland’s son,
 As you have whispered faithfully you were,
 And as mine eye doth his effigies witness,
 Most truly limned and living in your face,
 Be truly welcome hither. (2.7.195-199)

Juliet Dusinberre, in her edition of the play, glosses the passage as referring to miniature painting and then goes on to explain that Duke Senior is here expressing the idea that “Orlando is the portrait in little of his father, Sir Rowland. [. . .]” (Dusinberre 232 n.198). Yet there is no obvious reason why Orlando should here be seen as a portrait in little of his father: the repetition of “truly,” as well as the alliterative and rhythmical doublet ‘limned and living,’ make it clearly audible that Orlando does in fact “seemeth the thing itself” (Hilliard 43), or rather, in this specific case, his father himself. This is a moving passage in the comedy, given that the son’s features give his dead father a new life of sorts, bringing the dead’s effigy back to the visible world. What Duke Senior conveys here, through the use of the word “limning,” is the emotion he feels at meeting someone who so touchingly resembles his lost friend. The diminutive size of the picture, by contrast, does not strike me as central to the metaphor.

Going back to the “Phoenix” portrait—not “limning” as such, although reminiscent of Hilliard’s approach as miniaturist in the execution of jewels and ornaments, including hair – its propensity to move beholders may be better grasped when viewing it in relation to another depiction by Shakespeare, this time from *Antony and Cleopatra*. The parallel between the two illustrates the then common goal of poets and painters to achieve *enargeia* through the use of strikingly similar visual strategies:

Enobarbus: I will tell you.
 The barge she sat in, like a burnish’d throne,
 Burned on the water: the poop was beaten gold;
 Purple the sails, and so perfumèd that
 The winds were lovesick with them. The oars were silver,
 Which to the tune of flutes kept stroke, and made
 The water which they beat to follow faster,
 As amorous of their strokes. For her own person,
 It beggar’d all description: she did lie
 In her pavilion, cloth-of-gold, of tissue,
 O’erpicturing that Venus where we see
 The fancy outwork nature. (2.2.201-211)

It is well known that this passage is adapted from North's translation of Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*, which Shakespeare used extensively in this tragedy. North's corresponding description of Cleopatra reads as follows:

She disdained to set forward otherwise but to take her barge in the river of Cydnus, the poop whereof was of gold, the sails of purple, and the oars of silver, which kept stroke in rowing after the sound of music of flutes, hautboys, citterns, viols, and such other instruments as they played upon in the barge. And now for the person of herself: she was laid under a pavilion of cloth of gold of tissue, appareled and attired like the goddess Venus commonly drawn in picture [. . .]. (Bevington 3)

The small additions and changes made by Shakespeare in his versified adaptation bestow greater pictorial energy upon Cleopatra, now not only "attired like the goddess Venus" but "o'erpicturing that Venus." Interestingly enough, the dazzling apparition she makes in the play, every item around her a lustrous gold or silver, as in Plutarch, starts with a simile absent from North's text: "The barge she sat in, like a burnish'd throne." Not only does the line contribute to the incandescent poetry of the whole evocation, opening up as it does the brilliant tableau with a beautifully alliterative and regular iambic pentameter, but it also involves the addition of a word reminiscent of limning techniques. "Burnish'd," although used in two other instances in *The Merchant of Venice* and *Venus and Adonis* in a more general meaning (to make bright and glossy, to overspread with lustre), may here also be heard as a reference to the limner's art in Elizabethan England: "the practice of burnishing silver and gold in portrait miniatures was one of Hilliard's innovations, appearing in his works of the 1570s" (Muller and Murrell, 154 n.134). This term, echoing through the first half of the next line, "Burned on the water," resonates still in the continued alliteration: "the poop was beaten gold." "Beaten," another rather technical word (which the *OED* defines as "overlaid, inlaid, embossed or damascened with gold") gives yet a further material dimension to the picture. The following repetitions of "beat" and "stroke" (and their cognates) reproduce both the barge's rhythmical progress and the sounds of the goldsmith's workshop. Shakespeare's adaptation of North's Plutarch adds a fiery quality to the "picture of that Venus." Although the repeated "strokes" in the description, another Shakespearean revision, cannot apply to brushstrokes (the word did not yet have this meaning), they do not exclude limning as an undercurrent in the metaphors developed in the passage.

Limning and goldsmithery were often practiced by the very same persons in Elizabethan England, and most limners would have been trained as goldsmiths. Hilliard himself was descended from a family of goldsmiths (Goldring 20-27), which shows in his oeuvre's concern with the sheen of gold or silver. The vivid depiction, of Cleopatra, "o'erpicturing" others, may thus have been heard as a form of dramatic limning. Although Antony is the one compared with the phoenix ("O Antony, O thou Arabian bird!", 3.2.12), Cleopatra's blazing presence on the Cydnus has granted the Egyptian queen phoenix-like life in words. Her depiction is perhaps one of the

most famous in the tragedy and has moved spectators and readers alike for centuries, as echoed in T. S. Eliot's famous reference to her "burnished throne" at the beginning of part II of *The Waste Land*. The fascination which Cleopatra exerts upon everything and everyone around her, the river falling "amorous" of the oars, the wind "lovesick" with the sail of her brilliant barge, is all the more striking as "her own person" is in fact never limned. Her physical appearance, "beggar[ing] all description," remains invisible and unheard: only the ornaments and precious materials surrounding her echo and reflect, in the most literal sense, her own blinding presence.

The majestic portraits of Cleopatra in the Shakespearean tragedy and Elizabeth in the "Phoenix" portrait allow us to grasp better the craftsmanship behind their immaterial presence and aura. The "Phoenix" portrait, like Shakespeare's picture, relies upon the illusionistic rendering of lustre and sheen to create a sense of presence and liveliness whereby "fancy outwork[s] nature." The limner's expertise, along with the miniaturist's affinities with the goldsmith, is perhaps the main reason why the "Phoenix" portrait fascinates viewers to this day. It should therefore come as no surprise that this likeness is now almost always named after the jewel, rather than the queen herself, thereby illustrating the Arabian bird's most enduring power.

Conclusion: Life and Lustre

The 1570s coincided with Nicholas Hilliard's growing popularity in both France and England. Although he is now mostly remembered and praised for his miniatures, it has long been known that he did "occasionally work on a large scale: for example, he promised to 'make a faire picture in greate' of the Queen for display in the hall of the Goldsmith's Company in 1600" (McLeod 54). Yet only recent analysis, whose results were made public in 2017, allowed "secure identification of Hilliard's hand [. . .] which had proved impossible because of the variation in technique between painting in miniature and painting in oil" (McLeod 54). With Hilliard's hand now identified for certain, it has also become possible to distinguish between the parts of the picture he was responsible for and the ones he delegated to workshop assistants. Intriguingly enough, this has taken us back to what was perhaps the closest to his limning techniques and style: rather than "variation," it is through similarities and limning-inspired inflections that Hilliard managed to compose a most fascinating image of the bejewelled queen, who, like the ever-reborn phoenix, comes to pictorial life each and every time a viewer is drawn into her opulent reflection.

"A Booke of soche jewells and other parcells as are deliuered to the charge and custodie of Mistris Mary Radclyffe, one of the gentlewom[en] of the Quenes Maiesties privie chambre, a[nd] were parcell of soche jewells and were in charge of Mistris Blanche Parrye, mense Julii, 1587." London: British Library, Royal MSS, Appendix 68, fols 1-37.

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