

THE HILLIARD MINIATURE OF FRANCIS BACON

and the unsolved historical questions it raises

Part 1 – The return of the lost portrait



Nicholas Hilliard's miniature of the young Francis Bacon, National Portrait Gallery, NPG 6761

This is the first of an occasional series of short articles on some of Francis Bacon's most problematic, and therefore intriguing, portraits. Rather than recapitulate what we know already about certain portraits, the aim here is to highlight what we still don't know about them. As such, these articles are intended as starting points for future researchers to assess, critique and perhaps shed new light on.

Where better to begin than with the earliest uncontested portrait that we have of Francis? Every Baconian is familiar with Nicholas Hilliard's famous miniature painted in 1578, especially since 2006, when it was acquired by the National Portrait Gallery from David Manners, the eleventh Duke of Rutland. Catalogued as [NPG 6761](#), it has been widely reproduced online and in print, making it one of Francis's best-known and most celebrated portraits, not least

because of its pristine condition. If we can believe AI, *it has never been covered, altered, or obscured by later over-painting*. However, in 1964, Roy Strong observed evidence of minor retouching, specifically to the cheeks.

The most important outstanding issue regarding this much-studied Elizabethan masterpiece concerns its early provenance. But first we must question the age of the subject as stated by the artist in the inscription: Es S [*Etatis Suae*] 18 [in his eighteenth year].

The year 1578, according to the Elizabethan or Julian calendar, began on March 25. Francis's birthday fell on the twenty-second of the tenth month of the year which, in terms of Gregorian calendrics, corresponds to January. We know that by late-October or early-November, 1578, Nicholas Hilliard had left France and returned to England. Therefore, Francis was still only seventeen years old when Hilliard captured his likeness.

Clearly, Francis's youthful countenance still retains the last vestiges of boyhood. Under close examination, thanks to the NPG, we can just see the suggestion of a moustache captured by Hilliard. We can only speculate as to why Francis chose to exaggerate his age. Perhaps the image of himself that he wished to convey to the intended recipient of



Seen under magnification, Hilliard's brushwork is fast and minimal, using only the finest of brushes.

the portrait was of a sophisticated eighteen-year-old young man, as opposed to a naïve seventeen-year-old boy. The fact remains that, if the year 1578 is correct, the portrait must have been executed between March 25 (New Year's Day) and November, by which time Hilliard had left Paris.

The elegantly painted inscription in pure shell gold pigment which follows the arc of the left side of the elliptical frame reads: *Si tabula daretur digna Animum mallem.* Hilliard biographer, [Elizabeth Goldring](#), has pointed out

that: *This portrait is unique among Hilliard's surviving works in featuring a Latin inscription that goes far beyond the usual information on age and date.*

According to the National Portrait Gallery, the inscription translates as: *If a worthy portrait were granted, I would prefer the mind.* In his essay, *The Bacon Brothers in France*, Peter Dawkins provides a more eloquent and accurate interpretation of the artist's intention: *It would be preferable if a picture worthy of his mind could be brought about.* However, perhaps the most concise translation is: *If I could but paint his mind...*

Goldring offers a further insight into the possible origin of this original and highly appropriate epigram: *Although it is usually assumed that Hilliard personally devised the Latin tag inscribed on Bacon's portrait, it is more likely that Bacon took chief responsibility for it.*

It is safe to assume that the inscription was never intended to be read by anyone other than the miniature's recipient - the loved one. Although, at this stage, Francis was neither a qualified lawyer nor an official member of the English royal court, he appears as a distinguished young gentleman with a noble bearing. His boyish good looks are belied by his penetrating gaze, denoting maturity, confidence and determination. The addition of the inscription on the [blue bice](#) (azurite) background creates a psychological conjunction between the subject's body and mind. With extreme brevity and appositeness, Hilliard's miniature is far more than a physical likeness of Francis Bacon as a teenager. It is an endlessly intriguing keep-sake designed to evoke love and admiration.

As the most personal form of art, intimacy is the whole point of the miniature. Intended to be *viewed in hand near unto the eye*, as Hilliard wrote, miniature portraits were tangible forget-me-nots given to the subject of one's affection. The question then arises: Who was Francis sufficiently inspired by to commission his friend, Hilliard, to paint his portrait *in-little* at considerable cost - typically between three and five pounds?

After four and a half centuries, it is most unlikely that such a question can ever be answered with any certainty. However, in a short, relatively obscure [article](#) published in the *Burlington Magazine* in 1964, Roy Strong briefly outlined the miniature's provenance.

He revealed the surprising fact that, for its first two hundred and twenty years, Hilliard's portrait of Francis remained in France, only arriving in England in the early-1800's.

Strong goes on to mention in passing that prior to the portrait's purchase by the prominent London antiquarian book-seller, James Edwards (1757-1816) in the immediate aftermath of the French Revolution, *it had been in the French royal collection*. This detail is surely of major importance, for it suggests that the person that Francis gave his forget-me-not token of affection to may have been a member of the royal family of France.

The only evidence that Francis's portrait was preserved for over two hundred years in one of the royal palaces of France, such as the Louvre or Fontainebleau, is a hand-written note on the reverse of an early-nineteenth-century copy of the miniature in the art collection of Gorhambury House. This copy was made by two talented aristocratic sisters, Harriet and Charlotte, daughters of James Bucknall Grimston, the third Viscount Grimston (1747-1808). Harriet was born in 1776 and Charlotte in 1778, during the early stages of construction of the Grimston family's new, three-storey Palladian mansion, designed by Robert Taylor and completed in 1784.



Lady Charlotte Grimston, Stipple engraving by
L Jeffroy, date unknown

Growing up in the idyllic surrounds of Gorhambury Park, they were the last of the Grimston's to inhabit Old Gorhambury House, witnessing its gradual demolition during their childhood. Charlotte would later privately publish *The History of Gorhambury* when she was in her early-forties, in which she provided an invaluable inventory of many of the artworks that originally belonged to the Bacon family.

According to Grimston family archivist, Norah King the two sisters shared a penchant for the art of limning and a love of Francis Bacon's writing. "Their talents lay particularly in the field of writing and painting, and they decided to illuminate Francis Bacon's *History of King Henry VII* with miniature watercolour portraits of almost every person mentioned in the text. In search of sources for their illustrations they

visited libraries, museums, and country houses" [Norah King, [The Grimstons of Gorhambury](#), 1983, Phillimore & Co. p. 91]

Among the country-houses that the Grimston sisters visited when they were in their mid to late-twenties was the recently purchased home of [James Edwards](#) (1757-1816).

During his career, Edwards had had the opportunity and resources to purchase entire libraries in England and abroad, profiting handsomely from their sale in London. In 1804, after a long and successful career as one of London's most prestigious and wealthy booksellers, he retired to Old Verulam, in the vicinity of ancient Verulamium and the

Gorhambury Estate. In the last year of his life, Edwards disposed of his private library, consisting of hundreds of rare books, manuscripts and objet d'art. The 1816 [auction catalogue](#) confirms that the London bookseller owned many *highly curious and important manuscripts, some of them executed for Sovereign princes*. However, Hilliard's miniature of Francis is not listed, so perhaps he sold it privately to an unknown collector. From these few facts, we can deduce that Edwards was one of the first English antiquarians to benefit financially from the widespread dispersal of French royal and aristocratic possessions during and in the wake of the French Revolution (1789-99).

Imagine the sisters' surprise when their host showed them his original miniature of their literary hero, painted when he was in the prime of youth. It is not known if Edwards lent the Hilliard miniature to Harriet and Charlotte, or whether they produced their copy under his watchful eye. As previously mentioned, one of the sisters [probably Charlotte] noted on the reverse of their hand-painted reproduction that the original miniature belonged to James Edwards, who had informed them that it came from the French royal collection. This scrap of information is a game changer. It tells us that Francis's love token did not return with him to England in 1579, but remained among the art treasures of French kings until after the Revolution. It also reveals the astonishing coincidence that Hilliard's miniature, after being hidden for over two centuries in France, was returned by its new owner, Edwards, to within a mile or two of Francis Bacon's home of Gorhambury.

From the collection of James Edwards, Hilliard's miniature of Francis passed to an unknown collector, before being acquired by John Adair Hawkins (1757-1842). All we know about Hawkins is that he lived in the parish of St James Westminster, and that he owned several properties in Hampshire and Dorchester. The miniature must have come into Hawkins' possession before 1825, because an engraved copy of it was published that year with the inscription:

Engraved by WH Worthington from a miniature by Hillyard in the possession of John Adair Hawkins Esq.

The next known owner of Francis's portrait is senior British diplomat, Sir Philip Currie, 1st Baron Currie (1834-1906). After a lifetime of service in the Foreign Office, serving as Ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, and subsequently to Italy, Lord Currie's collection of rare antiquities went under the hammer in Rome in 1903. The auction consisted of over five hundred and sixty lots, including Hilliard's miniature of Francis Bacon. It was purchased by Henry Manners, the 8th Duke of Rutland. For the next hundred years, the miniature remained hidden from public view as part of the art collection of Belvoir Castle in Leicestershire, home of the dukes of Rutland since the early sixteenth century.

Hilliard's tiny portrait of Francis was eventually rediscovered by Roy Strong in the early-1960s during a visit to Belvoir Castle. Recalling the moment he found the *lost* miniature, Strong noted in 1995 that: *What is so surprising about Hilliard's miniature of the young Francis Bacon is that, although Belvoir Castle has a fine collection of miniatures on display, this one I spotted, separated from the others, in a case full of First World War medals.*

In the early-2000s, David Manners, the eleventh and current Duke of Rutland, came to an arrangement with H M Government through the Cultural Gifts Scheme which resulted in a half-a-million-pound tax write-off in exchange for two miniatures by Hilliard of immense historical significance. In 2006, the larger of the two portraits, that of Francis Bacon, was given to the National Portrait Gallery, while the other miniature of Robert Devereux (1567–1601) went to the [Scottish National Portrait Gallery](#).

Finally, in the twenty first century, Nicholas Hilliard's four hundred-and-forty-eight-year-old miniature portrait of Francis Bacon has assumed its rightful place as a national treasure of international significance. Partly because of its rare, pristine condition, it now has pride of place among the National Portrait Gallery's priceless collection of Elizabethan miniatures.

End of Part 1

In the next stage of this enquiry, the focus will be on the two and a half years that Francis spent in France as an attaché to the English Embassy in Paris. Although we know practically nothing about his activities between 1576-79, we can still track his movements to some extent. The same is true of the woman with whom the young Francis Bacon fell in love with, so the cipher story tells us. Much mythologised as *Queen Margot*, Marguerite de Valois played a central, mediating role in the protracted French Wars of Religion. Her royal progresses through French provinces are sufficiently well-documented to be able to piece together her itineraries. The aim is to identify when and where Francis and Marguerite, historically speaking, could have encountered one another.