A MINIATURE PORTRAIT OF THE EARL OF CUMBERLAND IN ARMOR

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The reign of Queen Elizabeth was a great age for miniature painting. This court art in small scale was in fact the beginning of the long tradition of English portraiture. The best of the Elizabethan miniaturists and certainly the most famous, after Hans Holbein, who brought the new art to England, was Nicholas Hilliard, the first native English painter of whom much is known and whose work has survived in any quantity. One of the finest of Hilliard’s miniatures is the portrait of George Clifford, K.G., third Earl of Cumberland (1558-1605), illustrated here, which was generously lent to the Museum by the Starr Foundation on the occasion of the opening of the new armor galleries last May. This miniature has a double interest for Museum visitors, for, in addition to its excellence as a work of art, it shows the earl wearing a suit of armor now in the Museum collection. Both are on exhibition in the armor galleries.

Like most miniatures the Cumberland portrait, painted in water color on vellum, was a personal adornment intended to be worn like a jewel, not to be preserved in a box. Hilliard, Court Limner, with a monopoly over royal miniature portraiture under Elizabeth and also under James I, was also a jeweler and goldsmith. The miniature is set in a frame of mercury-gilded copper, apparently the original, with a solid back and a convex glass front. A half-round molding with a suspension loop and decorative spirals encircles the frame, which is of redder gold than the molding and loop. The earl is shown in his early thirties, with dark, curly hair and a blond mustache and beard, and he wears the “purple” etched and gilded Greenwich armor long in the possession of his descendants at Appleby Castle, Cumberland (sold privately by the Earl of Hothfield about 1924 to the late Clarence H. Mackay, from whom the Museum acquired it). Behind his head are storm clouds with lightning and a winged red thunderbolt. Following the upper edge and inscribed in gold is the motto fulmen aquasque fero (I bear lightning and water), a personal one, no doubt referring, with the thunderbolt, to Cumberland’s boldness as a naval commander.

George Clifford, earl of Cumberland, was a typical Elizabethan courtier, gambler, seaman, and buccaneer. He succeeded to the title at the age of twelve, inheriting a handsome property. After several years of study at Cambridge and also at Oxford, applying himself especially to mathematics and geography, he embarked on a
career of restless adventure, both at home and abroad. Having “wasted his land and substance,” he organized ambitious expeditions against Spanish shipping in an effort to restore his fortunes. In 1588 he commanded the Elizabeth Bonaventure against the Spanish Armada. From 1586 to 1598 he fitted out ten privateering fleets, sailing himself with four of them. On an expedition to the Azores he took with him the mathematician and hydrographer Edward Wright, who wrote an account of the voyage. In Cumberland’s last enterprise he sailed with twenty ships to Porto Rico with the purpose of “cutting off the Spanish sinews of war,” the revenue from the West Indies. But like most of his undertakings it ended in failure. Although he had taken numerous valuable prizes, one of them a West Indian ship “richly laden to the value of a hundred thousand pounds,” it is doubtful whether his expeditions were not more of a loss than a gain to his estate.

Cumberland was a great favorite with Queen Elizabeth, who lent him ships for his voyages. In 1590 he succeeded Sir Henry Lee as the Queen’s Champion; he wore her glove set with diamonds in his hat and is shown with it in another, full-length, miniature by Hilliard, a detail of which is illustrated. Under his elaborate surcoat he wears a Greenwich armor blued and decorated with gilt stars, and it should be noted that the thigh and knee defenses of this harness are also in the Metropolitan Museum. This miniature was painted about the same time as the smaller one, but in it Cumberland displays different emblems: on his hat and cuffs armillary spheres and a caduceus and on a shield beside him the world between sun and moon.

Cumberland is said to have been affable, “of equal temper and good presence of mind,” which made him popular with his fellow courtiers as well as with the seamen under his command. He is described as a man of “great personal beauty, strong and active, accomplished in all knightly exercises, splendid in his dress, and of romantic valor.” Apparently he had all the necessary qualifications for success at court.

Both the suits of armor shown in the portraits were presumably made about the time Cumberland became Queen’s Champion, one of them possibly for the occasion of his induction. The one shown here, the best preserved and most complete Elizabethan harness in existence, made at Greenwich by royal warrant, is etched with Tudor roses and fleurs-de-lis joined by lover’s-knots and mercury-gilded. All the principal elements bear the cypher of addorsed E’s, the double cypher of Queen Elizabeth. The surface between the etched and gilded bands is “purple,” color being an essential element in knightly equipment. There is a detailed

The armor worn by Cumberland in the miniature opposite. Made in the Royal Armory, Greenwich, 1590-1592. Munsey Fund, 1932
Detail showing the winged thunderbolt and inscription drawing of this suit in an armorer's album in the Victoria and Albert Museum, the best executed of all the drawings in it, which shows the complete design. As the Garter is not included, it is probable that the armor was made before 1592, when Cumberland received the Order of the Garter. This armor is also represented in an oval portrait of Cumberland, formerly belonging to the Duke of Devonshire, lent to the exhibition of the Reign of Queen Elizabeth in 1933.

Nicholas Hilliard, the son of a goldsmith, was apprenticed to a jeweler and goldsmith and grew up in the atmosphere of this craft, although he also began his work in portraiture at an early age. In his Treatise on the Arte of Limning, written about 1600, he described the meticulous care and neat procedure required to make a fine miniature. His knowledge of metalwork, as well as his skill as a miniaturist, is shown in the great care with which he painted the details of the etched and gilded Cumberland armor, even though he deviated slightly from the original in the interests of effect and composition. In the armor, for instance, the pauldrons are asymmetrical while in the miniature they approach symmetry. The Tudor rose of the right pauldron has been replaced by a fleur-de-lis to balance the fleur-de-lis on the left shoulder. Several of the lover's-knots are rendered as inlaid beads of gold, which increases their brilliance, a typical goldsmith's device.

The miniature was formerly in the Northwick collection. It belonged to the family of Colonel H. G. Sotheby from 1862 until October 1955, when it was sold at auction in London. In 1947 it was one of over a hundred miniatures attributed to Hilliard that were shown at the Victoria and Albert Museum to commemorate the four-hundredth anniversary of the artist's birth. It was also exhibited, together with the Cumberland armor, at the Tower of London in 1951 in the exhibition of armor made in the royal workshops at Greenwich.

Fate has again brought the Cumberland armor and the miniature together. In examining them, many visitors to the armor galleries will realize how intimately art is bound up with history and with national life and character.

Detail of Hilliard's miniature of Cumberland with the queen's glove set with diamonds in his hat. National Maritime Museum, Greenwich