

'A Kind of Gentle Painting': Limning in 16th-Century England

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'Limning ... a kind of gentle painting',¹ is a quotation from Nicholas Hilliard's unpublished treatise of about 1600 concerning the art of limning, in which he excelled and of which his self-portrait of 1576 is a notable example (Fig. 1). Hilliard's comment is not one readily understandable to modern readers. Firstly there is the term 'limning', which for Hilliard described a water-based art, different from and contrasted to oil painting. Secondly there is Hilliard's assertion that limning was a 'gentle' art, which is to say gentlemanly. It is a comment from a time when to define oneself as possessing qualities appropriate to a gentleman was to align oneself with a particular status and rank in society. On closer examination, what defined a gentleman was a profoundly vexed question, as is a definition of limning.

This paper attempts to tease out what limning was, how and why it was argued for as a 'kind of gentle painting' and how we can situate John White's images of the New World in relation to limning in late 16th-century England. Although we know that John White was of gentle birth, we have no facts about his education or more specifically about how he learned the arts of drawing and painting in watercolour.² A critical examination of the arguments for limning as a 'kind of gentle painting' may illuminate the place of these skills in White's wider career.

White's images are painted using pigments bound with a binder, probably gum arabic, and applied to the painting support using water – what today would unproblematically be called 'watercolour'. This could equally describe the medium used by Hilliard. But on comparing a Hilliard portrait with one of White's images we note immediately the differences between the two artists in their use of this water-based

medium (Fig. 2). Hilliard's painting support was fine animal skin, called vellum. He laid what was called a 'carnation' – an opaque flesh-coloured ground – in the area of the face, and sketched in the main features of the face and body using a fine brush and brown watercolour. White's painting support was paper. He would make a light sketch of his subject using graphite (then called black lead), and laid no ground, working straight onto the paper. Hilliard used small hatches in the main features of his work, such as the face, and painted dense areas of pigment in, for example, the drapery. White worked both more broadly in flesh areas, and generally less densely in drapery. Both Hilliard and White did, however, use paint made from real gold, rather than imitating gold with yellow pigment, and both used gold and silver decoratively when the original object was not metallic; a notable example being flames painted using gold (Fig. 3).³

Today Hilliard's portraits are called 'miniatures'. In contrast, it has been customary to describe John White's works as 'watercolours'. This has effectively situated him as a pioneer of the watercolour medium that came to fruition in England in the 18th century as a predominantly landscape art, with such pre-eminent practitioners as J.M.W. Turner. Writers with a wider European perspective of the use of watercolour have also included White in surveys that encompass such notable artists as Durer, van Dyck and Rubens.⁴ But neither approach helps us to understand White, the 16th-century English artist. The first sets up a link between White's works on paper in the late 16th century and other works on paper from the early 19th century; a professionalized use of watercolour, catering to a growing public taste for this 'new' art. The second sets up a link between an unrelated group of artists working over a broad 200-year



Figure 1 *Self-Portrait aged 30*, Nicholas Hilliard, watercolour on vellum, 1577 (V&A Images, Victoria & Albert Museum, London, P.155-1910)



Figure 2 *Young Man among roses*, Nicholas Hilliard, watercolour on vellum, about 1587 (V&A Images, Victoria & Albert Museum, London, P.163-1910)



Figure 3 *Young Man against flames*, Nicholas Hilliard, watercolour on vellum, about 1590–1600 (V&A Images, Victoria & Albert Museum, London, P.5-1917)

period, with a particular focus on a small group of notable Continental oil painters who used watercolour for essentially private purposes. It is more appropriate to consider White's work with regard to limning, that 'kind of gentle painting', and to do this one must dispense with a further misleading concept, the 'miniature'.

Only one or two uses of the word 'miniature' can be found in the English language in the late 16th century, and these reflect knowledge on the part of the writers of the Italian origin of the word 'miniatura', Italian for the art of decorating handwritten books.⁵ The root of this word is the Latin verb 'miniare', to decorate with red lead. In medieval England, however, the word for this art was 'limning', and in France, 'enluminer' – both words coming from the Latin 'luminare', to give light. This is the same origin as the word 'illumination', still used today for manuscript decoration, encompassing both the idea of illuminating meaning through the use of images and the effect of the bright colours and silver and gold used in this art. Thus in his treatise Hilliard referred to 'limning' not 'miniature'.

It was not until a treatise by Edward Norgate, written around 1627, that the Italian word 'miniatura' was used as an unequivocal equivalent to 'limning'. Norgate referred often to Italian art and terminology, and it is unsurprising that his title was *Miniatura or the art of limning*. It was an etymological confusion that led to the anglicized word 'miniature' becoming a word describing a small version of something. Until the late 1590s, the word 'miniature' was completely unknown; a state document for example, referred to Hilliard's portraits of the Queen as, '... [of] our body and person in small compass in limning'.⁶ Richard Haydocke noted in 1598, writing in praise of Hilliard's art, 'limning ... the perfection of painting... This was much used in former times in churchbookes (as is well known)'.⁷ But in what way was Hilliard's art related to that used in 'churchbookes'? How might White's work also be related to this medieval art? And what ideas current around 1600 encouraged Hilliard to write that, 'none should meddle with limning but gentlemen alone'.⁸

In his treatise Hilliard made a number of statements about limning and its appropriateness for gentlemen. Limning was 'of less subjection than any other [kind of painting]; for one may leave when he will, his colours nor his work taketh any harm by it';⁹ it was not the master of one's time, but could give way to other business. 'Moreover, it is secret: a man may use it, and scarcely be perceived of his own folk [and is] sweet and cleanly to use'.¹⁰ Limning could be practised discretely, taking up neither undue space nor time, unlike more laborious and messy forms of painting. According to Hilliard, the 'first and chiefest precept' for limning was 'cleanliness', making it 'therefore fittest for gentlemen',¹¹ and indeed it was 'a thing apart from all other painting'.¹²

Hilliard's arguments did not concern the aesthetic superiority of limning, although he did compare limning and oil painting, noting that 'if you put too much gum then it will be somewhat bright, like oil colour, which is vile in limning'.¹³ Instead he was primarily concerned with social qualities, and the ideas he employed echoed two influential 16th-century discourses. The first was Baldassar Castiglione's *Il Cortegiano* written in 1528. This was only available in English, however, from 1561, translated by Thomas Hoby as *The Courtyer of Count*

Baldessar Castilio ... Very necessary and profitable for yonge Gentilmen and Gentilwomen abiding in Court¹⁴ The second was Sir Thomas Elyot's, *The Boke Named The Governour*, published 1531, which reinterpreted Castiglione for the very different Tudor context and was 'influential in disseminating new humanist ideas on the role of the gentleman in England'.¹⁵

The education and qualities expected of Castiglione's 'Courtier' were those that would recommend him to his prince personally. For example, learning was a 'true ... ornament of the minde', and while useful, the object of learning was to fit a gentleman for life at a Renaissance prince's court.¹⁶ For Castiglione the arts were an important branch of learning, and he formulated an argument against the rhetorical and social norm that the arts of drawing, painting and sculpture were not liberal arts but merely mechanic, the work of the hand not the mind. He argued that 'disegno' was the ability to abstract beauty from nature through imagination and a trained hand, a combination of mind and body. Hilliard significantly opened his treatise with an idea borrowed from Castiglione, that the Romans, 'in time past forbade that any should be taught the art of painting, save gentlemen only'.¹⁷ In fact Castiglione, recognizing the novelty of his arguments, offered the proviso that drawing was useful to gentlemen, for example for military purposes such as mapping.¹⁸ This idea was to become a commonplace in 16th-century English writing on gentlemanly conduct.

Elyot's 'Governor' was a more sober gentleman than Castiglione's glitteringly accomplished 'Courtier'. Writing for the court of Henry VIII, Elyot was predominantly concerned with the education and role of the gentleman as a member of the governing class, and he privileged practical studies. Thus while he mentioned the pleasure of drawing, painting and geometry, he insisted on their practical values for husbandry and for war.¹⁹ Elyot also warned gentlemen to exercise arts such as painting only as a 'secrete pastime, or recreation of the wittes late occupied with serious studies', and only in a boy's youth, to be abandoned when the time came to turn to 'businessse of greater importance'.²⁰ These ideas found an echo in Hilliard's treatise, specifically in his arguments for the appropriately gentlemanly art of limning, the cleanly, discreet art of watercolour.

These debates were not the province of mere rhetoric, but were keenly felt in Elizabethan society, as seen in George Gower's self-portrait in oil, 1579 (**Fig. 4**). Gower was the grandson of Sir John Gower of Stettenham in Yorkshire. He showed himself holding his palette, with an allegorical device of a metal balance, with a pair of dividers (used to establish proportions) outweighing his coat of arms. A verse paid homage to the 'virtue, fame and acts' that first won these family arms, but claimed that his skill as a painter maintained the reputation of his family. As Karen Hearn has commented, it is 'a startling claim in England where a painter was still viewed as little more than an artisan'.²¹ Hilliard, without the advantage of gentle birth, had to adopt a different form of special pleading.

Hilliard was the son of a notable Exeter goldsmith, Richard Hilliard. At the age of 14 he was apprenticed as a goldsmith; when he was 21 years old he became free of the Goldsmith's Company. But Hilliard's boyhood experience perhaps encouraged him to aspire beyond the confines of his given

trade. At the age of 10 he was placed in the household of John Bodley, a radical Protestant and publisher, and during the reign of the Catholic Mary Tudor went into exile in Geneva with the Bodley family (this is probably when Hilliard learned French).²² Bodley's eldest son Thomas was only two years Hilliard's senior, but in contrast to Hilliard he entered Oxford University as a 'commoner', meaning that his father paid his tuition, and with the backing of this education and contacts formed in the influential arena of the University, he entered Elizabeth's service as Gentleman Usher. He was soon entrusted with key diplomatic missions and in 1604 was knighted by Elizabeth's successor, James I.²³ Bodley's career demonstrates the opportunities for progression within Tudor society outlined by Elyot in his *Booke Named The Governour*. Elyot argued that while the 'publick weale' was made up of a hierarchic order of degrees of men, education could elevate a man to the governing class; 'excellent virtue and learning do enable a man of the base estate of the commonality to be thought of all men worthy to be so much advanced'.²⁴ The example of his childhood companion was literally before Hilliard in 1598 when he embarked on writing his treatise, because in that year Bodley sat to Hilliard,²⁵ and one can imagine this encounter spurring Hilliard to reassess his own career.

It is not known how Hilliard learned the art of limning, but as an apprentice to the Queen's goldsmith, Robert Brandon, he had contact with the court, and in 1572, three years after completing his apprenticeship as a goldsmith, he had his first sitting with the Queen. In 1576 he travelled to France in the train of Elizabeth's ambassador, Sir Amyas Paulet, staying for three years. This is where he painted his magnificent self-portrait (Fig. 1), no different in appearance from his courtly sitters, the image of the Renaissance artist. In England, however, the status of painters was socially problematic. The Painter-Stainers Company, established in 1502 to represent the interests of English painters and stainers, was formed of people

who mostly are thought of now as decorative painters; they painted barges, furniture and backdrops or architectural settings for grand but ephemeral court events.²⁶ In his treatise Hilliard pointedly claimed that limning was a 'thing apart from other painting', going on to say that, 'it tendeth not to common men's use, either for furnishing of houses, or any patterns for tapestries, or building, or any other work whatsoever'.²⁷

While in France, Hilliard held the position of 'Valet de Chambre' to the Duke of Anjou, son of the French King, and suitor to Elizabeth I.²⁸ Judging by his self-portrait and his treatise, this experience instilled in him a more Renaissance concept of the artist, one fit to be in company with princes, knights and scholars. In his treatise Hilliard proudly recalled conversations with the Queen and with Sir Philip Sidney, 'that noble and most valiant knight, that great scholar and excellent poet'.²⁹ Hilliard also wrote that as portraiture required sitter and painter to be in company together, it was important that the portraitist be able 'to carry themselves as to give such seemly attendance on princes as shall not offend their royal presence'.³⁰ But as noted, Hilliard wrote his treatise towards the end of a career that clearly had not met his expectations. He had returned from France around 1578, but the parsimonious and shrewd Queen did not offer him a prestigious and salaried position at court. Instead of becoming one of the Queen's household, he set up shop in Gutter Lane in London, painting the Queen only when she required his services, and any sitter who could afford to pay.

Thomas Hoby's 1561 translation of Castiglione had adapted the Italian text to the very different circumstances of the English court, while also adapting elements of Elyot's *Governour* to suit the new court of Henry VIII's daughter, Elizabeth I. Elyot for example had argued that through education a common-born man could be raised to the governing class. Hoby returned to the spirit of Castiglione by focusing on the virtues and qualities that would fit a man to life



Figure 4 Self-portrait, George Gower, engraving by James Basire after original oil self-portrait of 1579 (BM P&D 1865, 0114.355)



Figure 5 Thomas Bodley, Nicholas Hilliard, watercolour on vellum, dated 1598 (The Bodleian Library, University of Oxford)

at court rather than for government service, but as with Elyot, noble birth was not a prerequisite.³¹ Hilliard had not had the university education of his childhood companion Thomas Bodley, but following Hoby he argued that painting portraits of princes and nobles, 'of necessity requireth the party's own presences ... and so it is convenient that they be gentlemen of good parts ... though they be born but common people'.³² He went on to appeal to God and specifically to the genteel art of limning, in which God had granted him skill, for his own claim to gentility: 'God ... giveth gentility to divers persons, and riseth man to reputation by divers means', and while,

gentlemen be the meetest for this gentle calling or practice [i.e., limning], ... not every gentleman is so gentle spirited as some others are. Let us therefore honour and prefer the election of God in all vocations and degrees.³³

Hilliard, in his own words 'born but common people', argued that limning was 'not for common man's use', was 'a Gentle calling' and that God had raised him to this 'kind of gentle painting', thus conferring qualities and virtues that fitted him to be in company with princes and nobles.

Hilliard's treatise dealt predominantly with the practicalities of limning, the preparation of pigments for example. But it opened with this uncompromising argument for his gentility and the gentility of limning, made up of a concoction of ideas borrowed from Castiglione via Hoby and Elyot. It is a heartfelt manifesto for his right to the status that he felt had never been his. Were this an isolated exercise in rhetoric, we might justly ignore it as the convoluted self-justification of an embittered man, and not give credit to his claims for limning. But two publications suggest that Hilliard's ideas had some existing currency. The first was an anonymous publication of 1573, now called simply *Limning* [sic], published only a year after Hilliard's first sitting with the Queen. The title page opened, 'A very proper treatise, wherein is briefly sett forth the art of Limning', and offered the work to 'Gentlemen, and to all such other persones as doe delite in limning...'.³⁴ This publication went through a surprising six editions between 1573 and 1605, including three in the 1580s. It is notable that the 1573 treatise on limning did not concern portraiture specifically, but as the title page noted, was for 'the drawing ... of letters, vinets, flowers, armes [i.e., coats of arms] and imagery' and included the way to 'temper gold & silver ... and diverse kyndes of colours to write or limme withall upon velym, parchment or paper'. It should be noted that John White had worked on paper, not on the vellum used by Hilliard.

The second publication dated from 1606, the year after the last edition of the anonymous *Limning*, and only six years after Hilliard wrote his unpublished treatise. It was called *The art of drawing with the pen and limning* [sic] *in watercolours ... For the behoofe of all young Gentlemen ... By H. Peacham* [sic], *Gent.* (A later edition was called more simply *Graphice*.) This publication, along with the continuing currency and long-term success of the anonymous *Limning* between 1573 and 1605, and the manner in which Hilliard traced his arguments for the gentlemanly qualities of limning, point to a discourse of limning as a gentleman's art as existing beyond Hilliard's imagination.

Henry Peacham, 'Gent.', was the son of a clergyman, and like Thomas Bodley, was university educated (Cambridge, rather than Oxford), benefiting from the same social

opportunities accruing to such an education.³⁵ *Graphice* was probably intended to recommend him either at court or within influential aristocratic circles and Peacham was eventually to secure the patronage of one of the foremost nobles in the land, the Earl of Arundel, as tutor to his sons. Peacham's publications date from the reign of James I, the first written 20 years after John White's voyages to the New World. Nonetheless his publications can offer an insight into White socially and professionally, because by birth and education Peacham, born in 1578, was an Elizabethan gentleman. For example, as a 'Gent.', Peacham rehearsed the now commonplace idea that he practiced the arts of drawing and limning only as accomplishments: 'I have (it is true) bestowed many idle hours in it ... yet in my judgement I was never so wedded unto it, as to hold it any part of my profession, but rather allotted it the place ... of an accomplement required in a Scholar or Gentleman.'³⁶

Peacham's education was more comparable to that of Thomas Bodley, rather than that of Hilliard, and he sought accordingly to situate drawing and limning as merely additional and useful skills, not his whole practice and living. In the manner of Castiglione he offered a discussion of 'The excellency of painting' in general, but his treatise concerned the practicalities of learning the useful art of drawing and the gentlemanly art of limning. Chapter 1 of *Graphice* dealt with drawing; subjects included 'Man', 'Drapery' and 'Beasts, birds, flowers'. Interestingly Peacham noted the difficulty of drawing some animals because of their nimbleness, which implies a level of natural observation was expected. Chapter 2 dealt with 'The true ordering of all manner of water colours', so that the reader could, 'with more delight apparrell your work with ... lively and naturall beauty'. He also included information on the use of gold and silver in limning.

Peacham concluded by noting that, 'I had purposed to have annexed hereunto a discours of Armory ... not altogether impertinent to our purpose,' but that he had put it off until another time, 'being a while employed in some important business', echoing Elyot's idea that such activities should not distract from more worthy business. In this way he also significantly introduced the subject of 'armory' into his mix of drawing and limning – a subject that seems to have played a subtle part in setting up the gentlemanly associations of limning in the late 16th century.

'Armory' is the art and science of blazoning arms, which is to say the practice of researching, designing and painting heraldic devices.³⁷ This is often mistakenly called 'heraldry', a term that more correctly describes all that concerns the office of herald. The office of herald was prestigious – senior heralds for example played an important role in court events – and by the 16th century all heralds were royal appointments working from the College of Arms, founded by royal charter in 1484. The College was responsible to the Crown for maintaining the system of the grant of arms, which was effectively the bedrock of the hierarchical social system, and during Elizabeth's reign, there was an increased emphasis on genealogy in the College's work as wealthy 'new men' sought to prove their gentility and be granted arms. As any person bearing arms was by definition 'gentle', the heralds were effectively 'the gatekeepers to the gentry class'.

Armoury has its own language; the reference books in which arms were recorded are called 'armorials', the art of

painting arms is called 'blazoning' and colours are also described with words peculiar to armoury. Nonetheless, the blazoning of arms in armorials, on parchment or paper, was done using water-based pigments, as well as gold and silver. It should be remembered that the 1573 treatise *Limning*, which the anonymous writer believed to be of interest to gentlemen, included the limning of coats of arms, and specifically referred to the use of gold and silver. Hence also Peacham's comment that it was 'not impertinent' to the arts of drawing and limning to introduce the subject of the blazon of arms for his gentlemen readers. Even though in 1606 Peacham did not include a section on armoury, a woodcut included for the reader to copy showed a heraldic lion rampant.

In 1612 Peacham republished *Graphice* as *The Gentleman's Exercise*, this time including a section on the blazoning of arms. His 1622 publication *The Compleat Gentleman*, although a more ambitious work with chapters on a host of accomplishments for gentlemen, still included a chapter on 'Drawing, Limning and Painting', and one on 'Armoury'. This publication was notably different from the previous two. By this date Peacham had travelled on the Continent and was aware that oil painting was widely esteemed. But while he now referred both to oil painting and notable painters, his concern was the education of gentlemen, and he therefore maintained the Elizabethan prejudice that oil painting, unlike limning, was not fit for the practice of gentlemen.

Painting in oyle is done I confesse with greater judgement, and is generally of more esteeme than working in watercolours, but then it is more mechanic, and will rob you of overmuch time from your more excellent studies, it being sometime a fortnight or a month ere you can finish an ordinary piece ... beside, oyle [colours] ... if they drop upon apparell, will not out; when watercolours will with the least washing.³⁸

Despite the concession to oil, Peacham's viewpoint is still essentially an Elizabethan one. Hilliard for example had written that 'painting' was for the furnishing of houses, etc., while 'limning' was not for common men's use; and the 1573 treatise *Limning* had noted that, '... all colours to lime ... should never be tempered with any kind of oyle, for oiles serve most aptly for ... colours to lay upon stone, timber, iron, lead, copper, and such like'.³⁹

To summarize the three writers, the author of the anonymous *Limning*, Hilliard and Peacham: a knowledge of drawing and limning could 'delite' gentlemen; it was separate from and different from other types of painting; it was an art that gentlemen might wish to practice, could do so without censure, and would find useful for many gentlemanly interests or as an addition to their accomplishments; it would not compromise their gentility; and it could enhance the broad range of skills and knowledge appropriate to their class.

It was these ideas that Peacham began to consolidate in print from 1606 and which can perhaps help to make sense of John White's practice. During Henry VIII's reign, Thomas Elyot had first allowed for the idea that drawing had a useful purpose for gentlemen in the service of the King, for example in delineating fortifications. Nonetheless, the low social standing of professional painters in 16th-century England has in the past made it seem unlikely that John White, described as a 'painter' could be John White, Governor of the new City of Raleigh (Fig. 6).⁴⁰ But as has been discussed, in the reign of Elizabeth, ideas began to develop as to the gentlemanly

qualities of limning – the use of watercolour. John White's images can be seen as an example of the further development of Elyot's arguments for drawing; they too are useful in the service of royal patrons, recording fully in colour worlds encountered on voyages of exploration that they had personally sponsored.

In Peacham's 1622 publication, he added a new section on the 'manifold uses of limning' to his limning chapter. His list of subject matter probably reflects his knowledge of Theodor de Bry's engravings after White's images from the 1590s, but also indicates that Peacham, author of the 1606 treatise on drawing and limning, saw White's images as falling within the bounds of the gentlemanly practice of limning:

It bringeth home with us from the farthest part of the world in our bosomes, whatever is rare and worthy the observance, as the general Map of the country ... the forms and colours of all fruits, [the] severall beauties of their flowers of medicinable simples never before seen or heard of: the ... colours, and lively pictures of the Birds, the shape of their beasts, fishes, worms, flyes etc. It presents our eyes with their Complexion, Manner, and their Attire. It shews us the Rites of their Religion, their houses, their weapons, and manner of War ... Beside, it preserveth the memory of a dearest friend, or fairest mistress.⁴¹

Peacham's concluding subject, however, takes the art of limning back to portraiture; for example, Peter Oliver's portraits of the famous beauty Venetia Stanley, mistress and later wife of Peacham's contemporary, Sir Kenelm Digby (Fig. 7). Comparing Oliver's portrait with an example of White's imagery, the 'manifold' differences between works that could seemingly both be described as limnings are clearly apparent. It seems understandable, therefore, that the terms 'watercolour' and 'miniature' have been used to describe these different works, while 'limning' has generally been reserved for the illustrations found 'in former times in churchbookes', to use Richard Haydock's phrase. But as has been demonstrated, there was a late 16th- and early 17th-century discourse that defined 'limning' as a watercolour art, as different from oil, as



Figure 6 The grant of arms to the Cittie of Raleigh, 1587, John Vincent, (The Provost, Fellows and Scholars of The Queen's College, Oxford, MS 137, no. 120, p. 1)

an adjunct to drawing, as appropriate and useful to gentlemen, for use for portraiture and for ‘imagery’. John White’s place in Raleigh’s expedition, his role as Governor for the newly founded colony, his grant of arms, all suggest a man expected to have a range of skills beyond those of a specialist painter, and of a social standing beyond that of a professional painter. A discourse of limning as a gentlemanly watercolour art accommodates both White’s undoubted skill in the arts of drawing and limning, but also his probable standing as a gentleman. It remains necessary, however, to account for the distinct differences between White’s works and those of such portrait limners as Hilliard and Peacham’s contemporary, Peter Oliver.

A further written account of limning from the 1620s, contemporary with Peacham’s *Compleat Gentleman*, offers a possible explanation of this difference. Edward Norgate wrote his treatise *Miniatura or the art of limning* around 1627.⁴² Like Hilliard’s treatise it was unpublished, but in the same way it was much copied in manuscript form and circulated among an elite of interested gentlemen and artists (Norgate clearly knew Hilliard’s treatise). Norgate uncompromisingly asserted a quite different idea of limning to that found in Peacham’s *Compleat Gentleman*. His treatise was for a gentlemanly audience, but did not situate limning within a wider range of gentlemanly activities. His concerns were less social than Peacham’s; he was unconcerned with function, the ‘manifold uses of limning’ cited by Peacham, such as recording ‘whatever is rare and worthy of observance’.⁴³ For Norgate the rarity of limning was in the technique, not in what was represented, and the equation he drew between limning and gentlemanly qualities was in the fineness and expense of the materials and tools, the cleanly, neat nature of watercolour, the mystery of the technique, the exquisiteness of the finished ‘curious’ pieces, worthy of inclusion in the cabinets of princes.

Norgate echoed his predecessors in the basic information he gave for the preparation of watercolour pigments. But his interest was only in portraiture and the exquisite copies of oils performed in limning by Peter Oliver (Fig. 8). He also emphasised the use of vellum, and of hatching and stippling, close-worked to build up the image: ‘limning when finished is of all kinds of painting the most close, smooth and even’.⁴⁴ He further commented that if ‘your work appears not altogether so closed up as it should be, you must to bring it to perfection,



Figure 8 *Rest on the Flight into Egypt*, Peter Oliver, watercolour on vellum, 1628 (V&A Images, Victoria & Albert Museum, London, 740-1882)

spend some time in filling up the void and empty places’.⁴⁵ This is quite different from the looser, more open brushwork used by John White in his works on paper.

Recently, accounts of limning have been guided almost exclusively by Hilliard’s and Norgate’s unpublished but influential treatises, with their focus on portrait limning. Writers interested primarily in the development of what are popularly called portrait ‘miniatures’, have compounded this by effectively tracing one line of descent from the medieval art of limning found in ‘churchbookes’ to portrait limners such as Nicholas Hilliard and Peter Oliver.⁴⁶ But this ignores another noteworthy line of descent from medieval limning, one that adapted to different needs and concerns and that may have contributed to the wider gentlemanly associations of working in watercolour. This could allow us to accommodate both the Hilliard/Norgate conception of limning and that of Peacham under a more elastic understanding of limning.

Traditional accounts of the genealogy of limning in England trace a line of descent from illuminated manuscripts, which initially was the art of the monastery. In the 13th century, however, secular workshops developed, allied to the book trade, which employed scribes to write the text and limners to paint the images and decorate the letters. Then, towards the end of the 15th century there was a challenge to hand-worked book production from the invention of printing. In England limners also lost ground to the great Flemish workshops that specialized in luxury books and led the way in diversifying in the face of the encroachment by printing, painting images as separate works of art.⁴⁷ In the 1520s members of one of the leading Flemish families of limners, Gerard, Susannah and Lucas Horenbout, came to the court of Henry VIII, possibly as religious exiles, and it is Lucas who is credited with painting the first separate limned portraits. A portrait of Henry VIII is the earliest known example in England of what is now called a portrait miniature, designed not to illustrate a book, but to be set as a jewel or in a small box to be held in the hand.⁴⁸ Horenbout is believed to have taught the art to the German oil portraitist, Hans Holbein, and the two painters both worked for Henry until their deaths in 1543 and 1544, respectively.

Horenbout and Holbein were succeeded in this line of descent by Levina Teerlinc, the daughter of the great Flemish illuminator, Simon Bening. Bening never came to England, but Levina was employed by Henry VIII as ‘paintrix’, and although her place at the courts of Edward VI, Mary I and Elizabeth I is



Figure 7 *Unknown Woman probably Venetia Stanley*, Peter Oliver, watercolour on vellum, about 1615–1617 (V&A Images, Victoria & Albert Museum, London, P.3-1940)

recorded in accounts as 'Gentlewoman', it is known that she made New Year gifts of limnings to Elizabeth I, and a small group of portrait limnings have been tentatively attributed to her.⁴⁹ This line of descent usually situates Teerlinc as the link between the Flemish limning tradition of Bening and the Horenbouts, and Nicholas Hilliard.

It has never been established how Hilliard learned limning, but it is assumed that as apprentice to the Queen's goldsmith he could well have seen unmounted limnings, for which Robert Brandon's workshop was employed to make gold and jewelled settings. Hilliard himself contributed to the idea of a great line of descent by paying homage in his treatise to the iconic limnings by Holbein and claiming that he had ever followed his example, adding that 'most of all the liberal sciences, came first unto us from the strangers [foreigners]'.⁵⁰

But an account of limning in the 16th century that focuses solely on the development of portrait limning is too partial. Medieval English limning did not die out in the face of competition from 'strangers'. Instead English limners continued to 'decorate manuscripts in genres less prestigious than the devotional book; grants of arms, charters, heraldic and genealogical manuscripts and secular texts'.⁵¹ The English limner found a role particularly in the service of government; for example in the production of documents such as Plea Rolls. This tradition was discussed in Erna Auerbach's groundbreaking 1961 publication *Tudor Artists*, which traced this other dimension of what today might be termed 'visual culture'. The Plea Rolls of the King's, later Queen's, Court, particularly interested Auerbach, who traced the development of the portrait of the monarch in the opening letter 'P' of each Roll. This line of descent opens up to view a level of activity quite different to that of the small group of portrait limners.

Inevitably, however, attribution of particular documents to named limners is almost impossible, and even discovering the names of practicing limners is difficult. Auerbach did, however, find evidence of one such limner in a draft grant of monopoly to a William Walding, in 1574, a year after the 1573 treatise *Limning* was published. The draft grant stated that Walding had spent his time in 'our court of Chancery ... where he hath ... obtained ... the knowledge and perfect experience to lymne, draw, write and florish the letters of our name and style in letters patents ...'.⁵² Auerbach also found evidence in a court document that Walding was styled a 'gentleman'.⁵³

Another arena in which the arts of the scrivener and limner continued in use was the College of Arms, both in the production of limned grants of arms (Fig. 9), and in maintaining the armorials (reference books) recording the arms of gentlemen. The heralds' tasks also included designing (drawing) and blazoning (colouring) new arms. It is notable that the anonymous 1573 treatise described the use of limning for decorative work, such as flowers, for coats of arms, as well as for what it termed 'imagery'; a range of subject matter found in a work by William Segar, later Sir William Segar, who was knighted for his services as the most senior herald. The limning was commissioned in 1585 by the Mercers' Company, and the imagery of the long-dead John Colet was copied from a sculpture (Fig. 10).⁵⁴ Segar was first trained as a scrivener and was taken into the service of the courtier Sir Thomas Heneage, who introduced him to the College of Arms.⁵⁵

It seems much more credible to situate Peacham's more



Figure 9 Grant of arms to Hugh Vaughan, ink on parchment with waterbased pigments and gilding, 1492 (V&A Images, Victoria & Albert Museum, London, MSL 1948: 4362)

prosaic account of drawing, limning and armoury as arts of interest and of use to gentlemen within this tradition of limning. White's imagery can also plausibly be accounted for as a development of limning along this line of descent.⁵⁶ In contrast, Edward Norgate focused on a more elite and artistic form of 'limning'. His unpublished treatise of 1627 was written for Charles I's renowned physician Sir Theodore Turquet de Mayerne, who was fascinated by the mystery of the materials and techniques of professional artists.⁵⁷ It is even possible that Norgate consciously sought to counter the dilution of the art of 'limning' by Peacham's widely available publications. It is notable that it was Norgate who first used the Italian term 'miniatura', in place of 'limning', calling his treatise *Miniatura, or the art of limning*.⁵⁸ For those conversant with Italian this boldly reasserted the descent of limning from the highly wrought book illuminations painted for the delight of noble and princely patrons, a luxury art that then still flourished in Italy.

It is notable that Norgate himself was in the service of both James I and Charles I as the limner of important state letters dispatched throughout the known world. Norgate was Clerk of the Signet from 1625 and was granted the monopoly for writing and ornamenting with gold and colours all state letters.⁵⁹ His treatise, however, was an account of limning as a refined art form, describing techniques suited to the close-up focus of portraiture, and exquisite finish of tiny copies of oil paintings fit for a prince's cabinet. But this account of limning should no longer hold a monopoly. 'Limning' in the 16th century was a



Figure 10 Posthumous portrait of Dean Colet, William Segar, decoration for the front cover of the statute book of St Paul's School, 1584/6 (Mercers' Hall, London)

watercolour art that descended from, but also adapted, the limning found both in 'churchbookes' and in a wide range of secular documentary materials. Additionally, through Elyot's *Boke Named The Governour* and Hoby's translation of Castiglione's *Il Cortegiano*, 16th-century Englishmen developed a discourse concerning the usefulness of drawing as a gentlemanly 'accompliment', as it was styled by Peacham. In turn, limning was increasingly adopted as an appropriate adjunct to drawing, because of its sweet, cleanly, discrete qualities. Armoury, and the social and cultural fascination with genealogy and pedigree, added another dimension to gentlemen's appreciation of the usefulness of drawing and limning. This seems to have further enhanced the gentlemanly associations of limning. This combination of factors created an artistic environment in which it is perhaps possible to situate both John White, Governor of the City of Raleigh, and Nicholas Hilliard, one time 'Valet de Chambre' to the Duke of Anjou. White could certainly have been versed in the arts of drawing and limning without necessarily being a professional painter. While Hilliard, who painted Elizabeth I 'in small compass in limning' for more than 30 years, was able to argue that although undoubtedly a professional painter, as a 'limner' he was blessed by God with gentlemanly qualities that befitted him, 'to give such seemly attendance on princes as shall not offend their royal presence'.⁶⁰

Notes

- 1 N. Hilliard, *The Arte of Limning*, R.K.R. Thornton and T.G.S. Cain, eds, The Mid-Northumberland Arts Group, Manchester, 1992, 43.
- 2 K. Sloan, *A New World: England's first view of America*, London, 2007, 25.
- 3 For details of Hilliard's techniques see V.J. Murrell, 'The Art of Limning' in R. Strong, *Artists of the Tudor Court: The portrait miniature rediscovered 1520–1620*, London, 1983, 13–26. For details of White's techniques see Sloan, *ibid.*, 234–5.
- 4 For example, M. Hardie, *Water-colour Painting in Britain*, London, 1966, vol. 1, 51–8.
- 5 For a discussion of this issue see forthcoming article, K. Coombs, 'From Limning to Miniature: The Etymology of the Portrait Miniature', in *The Miniature Portrait c. 1500–1850: Current research and new approaches*, S. Lloyd, ed., National Galleries of Scotland, 2009.
- 6 K. Coombs, *The Portrait Miniature in England*, London, 1998, 8.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 7.
- 8 Hilliard, *supra* n. 1, 43. The best account of Nicholas Hilliard's life can be found in M. Edmond, *Hilliard and Oliver: the Lives and Works of Two Great Miniaturists*, London, 1983.
- 9 Hilliard, *supra* n. 1, 43.
- 10 *Ibid.*
- 11 *Ibid.*, 53.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 43.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 71.
- 14 Sloan, *supra* n. 2, 34.
- 15 S. Lehmborg, 'Elyot, Sir Thomas' in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, accessed online 23/5/2007, 3.
- 16 W.E. Houghton Jr., 'The English virtuoso in the seventeenth century, Parts I and II', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, no. 3, 1942, 51–73, and no. 4, 1942, 190–219, 59.
- 17 Hilliard, *supra* n. 1, 43. See also Sloan, *supra* n. 2, 33.
- 18 Sloan, *supra* n. 2, 33.
- 19 J.M. Major, *Sir Thomas Elyot and Renaissance Humanism*, Lincoln, Nebraska, 1964, 61–7, discusses Elyot's attitude to the Fine Arts.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 44; Houghton, *supra* n. 16, 58.
- 21 K. Hearn, *Dynasties: Painting in Tudor and Jacobean England 1530–1630*, London, 1995, 107, cat. 57.
- 22 For an account of Hilliard's career see Coombs, *supra* n. 6.
- 23 W.H. Clennell, 'Bodley, Sir Thomas' in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, accessed online 21/5/2007, 2.
- 24 Lehmborg, *supra* n. 15, 3; Sloan, *supra* n. 2, 33.
- 25 Edmond, *supra* n. 8, 25.
- 26 For an account of the Painter Stainers see A. Borg, *The History of the Worshipful Company of Painters, otherwise Painter-Stainers*, Huddersfield, 2005.
- 27 Hilliard, *supra* n. 1, 43.
- 28 Edmond, *supra* n. 8, 62.
- 29 Hilliard, *supra* n. 1, 63.
- 30 *Ibid.*, 45.
- 31 A. Bermingham, *Learning to Draw: Studies in the Cultural History of a Polite and Useful Art*, New Haven and London, 2000, 15–18.
- 32 Hilliard, *supra* n. 1, 45.
- 33 *Ibid.*, 45.
- 34 *A very proper treatise, wherein is briefly sett forth the arte of Limning* [sic], London, 1573, title page.
- 35 For Peacham's biography see 'Introduction', in H. Peacham, *The Compleat Gentleman*, G.S. Gordon, ed., Oxford, 1906, v–xxiii.
- 36 H. Peacham, *The Art of Drawing with the Pen, and Limning in Water Colours etc.*, London, 1606, facsimile reprint, Amsterdam, Theatrum Orbis Terrarum; New York, 1970, Opening remarks 'To the Reader'.
- 37 All information and quotes relating to 'armoury' taken from John Neitz, *Heralds and Heraldry in Elizabethan England*, at <http://elizabethan.org/heraldry/heralds.html>, accessed 14/03/2007.
- 38 H. Peacham, *The Compleat Gentleman*, London, 1622 (3rd impression, 1661), 130.
- 39 *Limning*, *supra* n. 34, f.vii.b. nota [3].
- 40 P. Hulton, *America 1585: The Complete Drawings of John White*, Chapel Hill and London, 1984, 7.
- 41 Peacham, 1622, *supra* n. 38, 125.
- 42 J.M. Muller and J. Murrell, eds, *Edward Norgate, Miniatura or the Art of Limning*, New Haven & London, 1997.
- 43 Peacham, 1622, *supra* n. 38, 125. For an extremely useful and extensive account of earlier manuscript illumination, see T. Kren and S. McKendrick, eds, *Illuminating the Renaissance: The Triumph of Flemish Manuscript Painting in Europe*, Getty Publications, Los Angeles, 2003.
- 44 Muller and Murrell, *supra* n. 42, 73.
- 45 *Ibid.*, 79.
- 46 See, e.g. J. Murdoch *et al.*, *The English Miniature*, New Haven and London 1981, and Coombs, *supra* n. 5.
- 47 C. de Hamel, *Medieval Craftsmen: Scribes and Illuminators*, London, 1992, 5, and R. Marks and N. Morgan, *The Golden Age of English Manuscript Painting 1200–1500*, London, 1981, 31–2.
- 48 For an account of Horenbout family see Coombs, *supra* n. 6, 15–16, and pl. 4, 14 for Lucas Horenbout, *Portrait of Henry VIII*, (Fitzwilliam Museum).
- 49 For an account of Teerlinc see *ibid.*, 24.
- 50 Hilliard, *supra* n. 1, 49.
- 51 Marks and Roberts, *supra* n. 47, 30.
- 52 E. Auerbach, *Tudor Artists: A Study of Painters in the Royal Service and of Portraiture on Illuminated Documents from the Accession of Henry VIII to the death of Elizabeth I*, London, 1954, 126–7.
- 53 E. Auerbach, 'Portraits of Elizabeth I on some City Companies' Charters', *The Guildhall Miscellany*, no. 6, February 1956 (offprint).
- 54 E. Auerbach, *Nicholas Hilliard*, London, 1961, 272, pl. 240.
- 55 A.R.J.S. Adolph, 'Segar, Sir William' in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, accessed online 14/5/2007.
- 56 On the Continent a separate tradition of watercolour was encouraged by interest in, for example, subjects such as natural history. The implications of this tradition for limning in England, and the possible effect on John White's own limning practice is discussed in Florike Egmond's introduction to part two of these conference proceedings.
- 57 Muller and Murrell, *supra* n. 42, 12.
- 58 *Ibid.*, 58.
- 59 See 'The Life of Edward Norgate' in Muller and Murrell, *supra* n. 42, 1–9.
- 60 Hilliard, *supra* n. 1, 45.