

“THAT IT SEEMETH TO BE THE THING ITSELF” - THE OBSESSION OF 16th CENTURY MINIATURE PAINTERS TO IMITATE THE BEAUTY OF NATURE

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Nicholas Hilliard, a XVIth century English painter of portrait miniatures or limnings, was driven by the idea of depicting nature as realistically as possible. “That it seemeth...the work of god and not of man”. To achieve his aim he used several special methods and techniques, which partly derived from medieval book illumination traditions but also from his own background as a goldsmith and possibly as an alchemist. He applied an unusual number of black pigments, some made from charred fruit-stones, to match the appearance of black velvet and silk cloth. He also sorted pigments into various grades. For instance a medium grade of lead white was ideal to imitate the powdery appearance of makeup and another grade, with very fine particles, for the glossy impasto paint he used to depict lace. The thick application of lead mixed with a lot of gum to achieve this effect led to typical cracks and flaking. Some damage might have already occurred during his lifetime, nevertheless he continued to use the techniques, which caused them. Another example is the application of powdered silver (for armour and the highlights on pearls), which turned out to be problematic as the silver soon started to tarnish. Thickly applied resin on silver grounds to create the glossy impression of precious stones and enamel often became squashed when fresh, and chipped or flaked off when dry. There are often warnings of using certain materials and techniques in contemporary treatises. Nevertheless the mentioned recipes seemed to have been part of “the alchemy” of limnings and therefore regarded as indispensable. For instance yellow derived from rose petals even though very light fugitive, might have been considered as a magical ingredient in the realistic depiction of roses and plants. The lead white used for the skin tone or “carnation” was in fact also used as real make up at the time. Hilliard’s treatise also mentions alternatively the application of “quicksilver white” for the “carnation”, which as he mentions the “women painters” (make up artists of his period) have used. He even went as far as to set a real diamond in a miniature painting to depict the stone with itself. Similar approaches can be also observed in Indian miniatures from the 16th century and later periods. Often glossy green insect wings were stuck to the painting to replicate emeralds, mica to imitate glass and mirrors and even real pearls were cut into half to be mounted on the paint surface.

The authors practically reconstructed many of these methods and effects in the context of a research project in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. The practical work was based on instrumental analysis of original portrait miniatures and extensive analysis of earlier and contemporary written sources. The practical approach proved to be highly informative as it not only helped to reconstruct the amazing effects of the original appearance but also to identify typical damage inherent in the use of specific materials and techniques.