

## The Hilliard Portrait of Francis Bacon



*The mystery surrounding the miniature portrait of Francis Bacon, aged 17, painted in 1578, in France, by Nicholas Hilliard, the Queen's miniaturist.*

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In 1578 a miniature portrait of Francis Bacon was painted by Nicholas Hilliard, the English portrait miniaturist, when both Francis Bacon and Nicholas Hilliard were in Paris. The portrait must have been done before October 1578, as Hilliard returned to England that month, which means that Francis Bacon, who was born 22 January 1561, was in his 18<sup>th</sup> year of age.

The Latin inscription surrounding the portrait reads: "1578. Si tabula daretur digna Animum malle[m]. Æ[tatis] S[uae] 18". The Latin sentence can be translated as: "It would be preferable if a picture worthy of his mind could be brought about."



**Francis Bacon - miniature by Nicholas Hilliard (1578)**  
(Photo © FBRT. Original now in the National Portrait Gallery, London)

Nicholas Hilliard (1547-1619) was Queen Elizabeth I's official limner (miniaturist) and goldsmith. Soon after completing his seven-year apprenticeship in London in 1569, Hilliard was patronised by the Earl of Leicester. Hilliard made "a booke of portraitures" for the Earl in 1571 and was commissioned by the Earl to do further work. Soon after, he was appointed as Queen Elizabeth I's official limner, and painted a miniature of the Queen in 1572. He also completed two famous panel portraits of the Queen (the 'Phoenix' and 'Pelican') before he went to France in 1576. For much of his time in France, Hilliard stayed with the English Ambassador, Sir Amyas Paulet, with whom Francis Bacon was also staying as an attaché.

In Hilliard's miniature, Francis Bacon is shown with features similar to those of the Queen in Hilliard's miniature portrait of Elizabeth made in 1572, whilst Francis' dark brown curly hair is similar to that of Leicester. Moreover, Francis' dark brown eyes are the same colour as those of both the Queen and Leicester, and are not the blue-grey eyes of Sir Nicholas and Lady Anne Bacon. As Jean Overton Fuller reports in chapter 2 of her book, *Francis Bacon: A Biography*, according to expert advice, because of this eye colour difference the likelihood that Francis Bacon was not the child of Sir Nicholas and Lady Anne Bacon is very high indeed.



**Queen Elizabeth I - miniature by Nicholas Hilliard (1572)**

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<https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw02073/Queen-Elizabeth-I>



**Robert Dudley - miniature by Nicholas Hilliard (1576)**

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<https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw03852/Robert-Dudley>

Far more noteworthy, however, than the difference in eye colour, the importance of which is debatable, is the fact that there is no record nor even any evidence of Hilliard ever having painted Sir Nicholas Bacon or Lady Anne Bacon or Anthony Bacon, which one might have expected, seeing as he painted Francis, the (supposed) younger son of the family. Instead, Queen Elizabeth, the Earl of Leicester and Francis Bacon were portrayed in a set of similar miniatures by the Queen's official limner, who had been introduced to the Queen by Leicester, and it was the Queen who had sent Francis Bacon to France in 1576 "by her hand".

By contrast, Sir Nicholas Bacon had a set of painted terracotta busts made of him and his second wife, Lady Anne (née Cooke), and of their son Anthony Bacon.<sup>1</sup> The three busts were made c.1566, to be displayed in Sir Nicholas and Lady Anne's newly-built family home of Gorhambury House, near St Albans, the building of which had by then become sufficiently complete so as to be habitable. The busts show Sir Nicholas Bacon aged c.58 years, Lady Anne Bacon aged c.35 years, and Anthony Bacon aged c.7-8 years old. Anthony was Sir Nicholas and Lady Anne's first-born son, so it was natural that he should have been sculpted as part of this family set; but, notably, no bust was made of Francis Bacon, who would have been aged 5 at the time.

As a result of the Queen's visit to Gorhambury in August 1568, during which the Queen had remarked to her Lord Keeper, "My lord, what a small house you have gotten," Sir Nicholas Bacon set in motion the building of a Long Gallery extension to the main house. Sir Nicholas Bacon then had the set of three family busts carefully and prominently placed in the Long Gallery, in readiness for the Queen's second visit to Gorhambury in July 1572. But still there was no bust of Francis Bacon. The omission is startling, and pointedly suggests that Francis was not the Bacon's natural son, and that the Queen knew this.



**Terracotta bust of Sir Nicholas Bacon, Lord Keeper of the Great Seal (c.1566)**



**Terracotta bust of Lady Anne Bacon, née Cooke (c.1566)**



**Terracotta bust of Anthony Bacon (c.1566)**

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> At one time, in the absence of any name on the bust, the bust of the child was assumed to be of Francis Bacon; but both reason and closer study renders this unlikely. Sir Roy Colin Strong, CH, FRSL, who served as director of both the National Portrait Gallery and the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, states in his book *Tudor and Jacobean Portraits* that he considers the bust to be more likely that of Anthony Bacon, judging by the age of the child depicted and the style of the clothing.