



Queen Elizabeth I - the Pelican portrait after Hilliard, 2010
The Richard Campbell collection

These 12 painted enamels chart her progress in developing and refining her considerable skills, a journey which she started 34 years ago.

I visited Gillie at her home in Devon, where she works from the studio she has had converted within the Devon Longhouse that she and her husband restored over the years into a comfortable home. It was an atmospheric drive from the station, the taxi driver pointing out the black clouds sitting on Dartmoor and telling me we were going to "the middle of nowhere". Seeing the dark carved oak 16th century panels in the house, it all seemed in keeping with the portraits in the Richard Campbell Collection, many of them painted 'after' artists such as Hans Holbein the Younger (1497–1543), Nicholas Hilliard (1547–1619) and Isaac Oliver (1565–1617).

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The painted enamels of Gillie Hoyte Byrom

By Frances Loyen

A slim volume sits on the shelves of the library at Goldsmiths' Hall on the work of Gillie Hoyte Byrom. *The Richard Campbell Collection of Enamel Portrait Miniatures* by Gillie Hoyte Byrom was produced in 2009 in a very small edition illustrating 12 exquisite portraits and gives a detailed explanation of how each piece was painted, layer by layer. This is a recipe book for those who would like to know how the work was achieved and a precise guide for those who would follow in Hoyte Byrom's footsteps in creating small masterpieces.

Gillie had no formal training as an enameller or goldsmith. The daughter of a tea planter and a teacher, her early years were spent in Sri Lanka, the family moving to Norfolk when she was still a small child. Although introduced from an early age to art subjects by her family – her mother had studied textiles at Edinburgh and her aunt was a commercial artist – she opted for science subjects at school before taking a teaching degree specialising in zoology at Homerton College, Cambridge.

In 1975, qualified to embark on a teaching career, she went

for a week-long break to Flatford Mill Field Study Centre to try her hand at stained glass, enjoying it so much that, at the end of her stay, she stepped in to fill the vacancy as cook. She later became secretary to the Warden. She stayed for two years.

When work was finished for the day, she would join in the courses, doing lots of drawing, botanical illustration and esoteric subjects such as 'History in the Hedgerow'. Then, one day, she sat in on a demonstration of enamel painting and knew, as she put it, that "this was it": she had to learn to paint using vitreous enamel. It was the beginning of a life-long passion.

As part of her zoology degree, she had learnt the conventions of scientific drawing, spending four years looking into the lens of a microscope with her left eye whilst drawing. These line drawings had to be clear and simple with no shading and that discipline taught her very quickly to convey proportion. She studied botanical drawing at the same time and this all equipped her with a drawing

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language that she would not have gained at an art school at the time when formal observational drawing was no longer being taught.

With this change of direction in mind, Gillie spent a year in Norwich attending the Art School for a short course in silversmithing, setting up an enamelling workshop in her mother's basement and taking a PA/secretarial qualification. However, very aware of her limited contact with like-minded people and having heard of the Devon Guild of Craftsmen, she decided to head off for the West Country. At the time, there was no network, as exists today, of organisations around the country that encourage and support artist craftsmen, makers and designers. Devon, also the home of the Dartington Hall Trust, was the beacon to head for. She found a job and somewhere to live and continued to teach herself enamelling, showing and selling her work where she could – at the Cider Press Gallery and the Craft Gallery in Totnes, amongst other outlets.

For 12 years, she painted flower studies in enamel for jewellery and box lids, using a local jeweller to produce a range of settings for her enamels. She loved the brushwork, "the painterliness",

of painted enamels and did not attempt other enamelling techniques such as *champlevé*, *cloisonné* or *basse-taille*, which



King Henry VIII, 1537, after Hans Holbein the Younger, 2007
The Richard Campbell collection

incorporate metal carving and forming.

Being self-taught, Gillie experimented freely, which added to the later fluency and speed of her brushwork – "errors have taken me off in good directions", she says. But the results were haphazard and she realised she needed some training to further her technique, besides which

painting flowers had become rather repetitive. In 1987, Rosalind Savill, Director of the Wallace Collection, showed her the collection's 18th century miniature portraits. For a painting to qualify as a portrait miniature the head size needs to be within 50mm and stand the test of full magnification. Gillie decided to find out "how to paint like that".



Gillie Hoyte Byrom

Alan Cooper Colour Labs

Rev. Jack Cruse and grandchild, 1996
Courtesy of the Rev. and Mrs. Jack Cruse
Alan Cooper Colour Labs



Here was something that bridged science and art and gave me method to follow".

In 1985, her enamelled painting, *Daisy Chain*, was exhibited at the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition. It was a popular piece and, because of it, she joined both the Royal Miniaturists Society and, encouraged also by Jane Short's interest, the British Society of Enamellers (BSOE). It was with the BSOE that she went to the Biennale International de L'Email in Limoges (France) and discovered the Lotjia School. She had not found anywhere in the UK to teach her more advanced techniques and the Lotjia in Barcelona ran a five-year enamelling course. She was accepted into the fifth year of the school because of her years of practice, taking extra master classes with Marie Angeles Cera de Derch, an expert in enamel painting. She learned to apply the paint by fine stippling, to use overglaze instead of underglaze "where the

chemistry can go so wrong" and how to lay down thin layers of paint onto a ground of opalescent white enamel.

Enamelling workshops are warm inviting places, the air is faintly aromatic from the oils used to thin and make workable the metal oxides which produce the colours. As Gillie fired and then removed a small painted plaque from the kiln, she was completely in control of the process, "but look", she pointed, "completely black, it looks totally burned out... and now see the colour slowly comes back, it is almost alchemical. I have the same feeling of excitement now seeing the newly worked image emerge as I've always had". The technique, which she learnt, of using white opalescent enamel as a base coat was a major breakthrough for her. She still speaks today with enthusiasm of its qualities: its texture and ability to take on the paint and absorb it on firing, and its visual effect. Having fired three opalescent coats, the

opalescence was lost but still not quite opaque. It is a perfect medium "to show the youthful bloom of a baby, the complexion just comes across beautifully". She goes on to say, with a chuckle, "a craggy face is much harder to do... I charge more for character lines".

She goes on to say, with a chuckle, "a craggy face is much harder to do... I charge more for character lines". Gillie's career, painting formal portraits of children and babies as well as horses, pets and houses, usually from photographs, continued and, in 1995, at the suggestion of Phil Barnes, the enameller, she submitted work to the Goldsmiths' Craft and Design Council in the new category of vitreous painted enamels. This annual competition and exhibition of work, held at Goldsmiths' Hall, is open to all those practising silversmithing, jewellery and allied crafts. The many categories within the competition give incentive to extend technical skills

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and provide a means for practitioners and students to exhibit and share knowledge within the trade. She entered four miniatures on copper and won all the prizes in this field. She also experienced the strong tradition within the trade to pass on and to share techniques, skills and technical advances, and to encourage quality of craftsmanship.

In 1997, Gillie was commissioned by the Hilliard Society to design and paint a presidential medal. She produced a very beautiful miniature portrait of Nicholas Hilliard in painted enamel, based on his self-

portrait in watercolour on vellum in the Victoria and Albert Museum. She followed this, in 1998, by entering for exhibition with the Royal Miniaturists Society an enamel-on-gold piece, *Isaac Oliver's Portrait of his Wife*, circa 1609. This was purchased by Richard Campbell, a collector of miniatures with a great interest in paintings of this period, who then commissioned a second piece, a self-portrait of the Elizabethan miniaturist Isaac Oliver, based on the original watercolour on vellum in the National Portrait Gallery. This was the start of a collaboration lasting 13 years, whereby Campbell commissioned, at least once a year, mostly historical enamel portrait miniatures.

Every year, Gillie submitted her current miniature for

Richard Campbell to the Goldsmiths' Craft and Design Council winning first in her class every time. She modestly states that there was little competition and that "over the years, I was competing with myself". She stretched herself to improve technique, to experiment and to raise her standards, and the encouragement and generous patronage of Richard Campbell allowed her to experiment with such methods as underlaying precious metal foils in order to simulate the costumes of the period. Every year, the judges would give advice,



Sequence for Hilliard badge (line drawing, 2nd of 7 firings, applying gold, and the Presidential medal, below), 1997
Courtesy of the President of the Hilliard Society of Miniaturists
Gillie Hoyte Byrom

always encouraging her to experiment and to stretch her abilities. She speaks with gratitude of, amongst others, Alan Mudd, who explained to her about polishing enamels. Keith Seldon introduced her to the Genevan method of finishing the portraits with a thin layer of transparent enamel flux, which burns out some finer detail, this being allowed for in the painting process. Graham Hamilton of Kempson & Mauger taught her the many advantages of using gold rather than copper, which distorts far more easily in the firing. "It was a 15-year apprenticeship and I have been blessed to have been able to put together a collection that has honed my technical skills".

In 2007, her portrait *Henry VIII 1537 after Hans Holbein the Younger* won the highly coveted Jacques Cartier Memorial Award. This is the most prestigious award given by the Goldsmiths' Craft and Design Council – it is discretionary and only presented for the finest technical achievement. It was after the presentation of this award that she and Campbell decided to bring together the enamelled miniatures in a book.

Gillie enjoys academic rigour and a lot of the pleasure of creating the historical miniatures lay in the research that was necessary. For example, when commissioned to produce a portrait of Nelson,

she had to be guided by her research, studying portraits and sculptures. This is one of the ways that the historical pieces have stretched her most – she enjoys a project, immersing herself in work. In taking an acrylic painting course, she found that the speed of the line achieved when painting in acrylic transferred to her miniatures.

Her membership of organisations such as the British Society of Enamellers and two major miniaturist societies, amongst others, has enabled her to exhibit regularly, to gain recognition and to meet like-minded artists. In 2000, she was given a solo exhibition at Studio Fusion on London's South Bank and, in 2008, she exhibited at the Devon Guild of Craftsmen. In 2005, she taught enamel painting in Beijing and visited Russia in 2006 to make a comparative study of enamel painting. She now has plans to teach and "pass on the baton".

Gillie painted a final piece in her collaboration with Richard Campbell in 2010 that is now an addendum to the book. This followed on from her portrait of King Henry VIII and is based on the *Pelican Portrait of Queen Elizabeth I* by Nicholas Hilliard. Here, she has refined her skill in stippling gold powder under a transparent flux that allows the gold base to shine through. She considers this to be her

best piece and it certainly holds its own against the portrait of King Henry in both technical skill and imaginative use of the medium.

The book is a visual record of the collaboration between a patron and artist, and illustrates how positive and satisfying commissioning a piece of work can be. The collaboration has allowed Richard Campbell to put together a collection of small masterpieces, each one an award-winning jewel, and Gillie has learnt, as thoroughly as she could ever have wished, to "paint like that" and to achieve the goal she set herself 34 years earlier.

There is another aspect to Gillie's work, more subtle and one we did not discuss on my visit. During the latter part of those 34 years, she has made a living as a painter of miniature portraits. Looking at these other paintings, together with those illustrated in the book, a personal style can be seen to have developed. It is this achievement, not consciously sought, that transforms Gillie Hoyte Byrom's enamels from very finely executed paintings to miniature works of art.

