

# Three Miniature Portraits

Lord Lorenzo Petrucci

This is a set of three miniature portraits of Margaret Northwode, Sigurd Grunewald, and Anfelisa, called Meg, painted in the style of the second half of the 16th century in England, France, and Flanders.

## Miniature Portraits

The miniature portrait as a separate art form developed out of manuscript illumination during the latter half of the 15th century and the first part of the 16th century. The term “miniature” comes from the Italian term for illumination, *miniatura*. This in turn is derived from the Latin *miniare*, “to color with red lead”, which was a technique used by manuscript illuminators. In England the practice was referred to as “limning”, from the Latin *lumen* (“light”), the same root as “illumination”. (Coombs, 7)

Miniatures were most often commissioned as personal gifts expressing love or favor.

## Period Materials

Most extant miniature portraits are painted on vellum. Nicholas Hilliard’s technique to add stiffness, as described in his *Arte of Limning*, was to stick the vellum to the back of a playing card with starch glue. There are several examples of extant portraits that show evidence of this. (Ibid., 40)(Fig. 1)

The paints used for limning were the same as those used for illumination, being a variety of powdered pigments mixed with a binder (commonly gum arabic or glair) in mussel shells. The pigments used by Hilliard on the portrait in the Heneage (Armada) Jewel, for example, include white lead, vermilion, red lead, azurite, lazurite, orpiment, pararealgar, yellow ochre and malachite, in addition to gold. (Derbyshire & Withnall)

## Size and Shape

The most common format of the miniature portrait by the end of the 16th century was an oval, 2” wide by 3” tall, and this size would remain popular for centuries afterward. (Coombs, 32) A few were rectangular, and many were round. Size also varied from 1” across (Fig. 2) to several inches (Hilliard’s *Young Man Among Roses* measures 2.9” x 5.3”) or larger.

## Composition

Though some artists occasionally executed full length miniatures (Ibid., 44), the vast majority are bust length, often only as far down as the shoulders. The round shape lends itself best to the head-and-shoulders length, while an oval allows more of the torso to be shown. The face was usually shown in a three-quarter view, though occasionally a frontal view would be used. The dark blue background is by far the most common, even in the earliest miniatures. Often there is an inscription painted in gold, either horizontally to either side of the subject or around the edge of the portrait. This is usually a combination of the year it was painted (“Anno Dm. 1577”), the subject’s age (“Ætatis Suæ 58”), and/or a motto.



Fig. 1: Mrs. Jane Small (reverse), Hans Holbein, 1536. Here you can see the playing card backing of the vellum.



Fig. 2: Portrait of Unknown Woman, Levina Teerlinck, c. 1560, Diameter: 1”

## Process

Hilliard documented the process he used, starting with a piece of vellum glued to a card and painted with a base flesh tone. He would keep several of these on hand in different shades so that he could simply choose the one appropriate to his subject rather than wasting valuable sitting time getting the skin tone right. He would then sketch the basic shapes and paint over that. (Ibid., 40)(Fig. 3)

## Clothing

In choosing the clothing to depict the three subjects in, I tried to keep them all chronologically close together. Margaret is painted wearing a recent gown of hers that is based partially on the women in Joris Hoefnagel's *Fete at Bermondsey* (c. 1570). I added a coif and hat also found in that painting. Sigurd is wearing a black doublet in the style of the 1570s, trimmed with horizontal rows of gold braid. Anfelisa's outfit is copied from François Clouet's portrait of Elizabeth of Austria (c. 1571).



Fig. 3: *Unknown Woman (unfinished)*, Nicholas Hilliard, c. 1575-1580. This unfinished miniature has only been sketched in and the features roughly indicated.

## Deviations From Period Materials And Technique

In producing these miniatures, I chose to use a number of non-period materials and methods.

- \* I used a parchment-look paper (Pergamenata) instead of more expensive vellum.
- \* Instead of expensive and toxic period pigments, I opted for gouache, a water-based paint that gives good opaque coverage.
- \* Since the portraits are not covered and gouache is very easily damaged by moisture, I applied a clear matte spray paint to seal the finished miniatures.
- \* Lacking a deck of period style blank backed playing cards (let alone any I was willing to sacrifice), I used heavy cold press paper to stiffen the portraits. They are printed on the reverse with spades in black ink, using a small rubber stamp.
- \* I used plain white glue to affix the backing, rather than starch glue, which I am not familiar with. As this was not the focus of the project, I felt no need to experiment with new adhesives.
- \* On two of the miniatures I used the name of the subject as the inscription. This is a common practice in larger scale 16th century portraiture, though it is extremely uncommon on miniature portraits. I feel that it is an acceptable choice, as my likenesses are not always entirely accurate and the subjects are pictured in clothes that often make them less readily recognizable.
- \* Since I was working from photographs instead of live subjects, my process was somewhat different than Hilliard's. I started with a composite image made in Photoshop, which I then printed and traced onto the paper with the aid of a light box. I then executed the painting and glued it to the backer. I then trimmed it down to fit the frame, and added the inscription at the end to make sure it matched the final edge of the portrait. The sealant was added at the end of the process. (Fig. 4)



Fig. 4: A rough Photoshop composite, a pencil sketch, and the final painting.



## Sources

Coombs, Katherine. *The Portrait Miniature in England*. London: V & A Publications, 1998.

Derbyshire, Alan and Withnall, Robert. "Non-Destructive Pigment Analysis Using Raman Microscopy." *V&A Conservation Journal*. January, 1999 (Online)

[http://www.vam.ac.uk/res\\_cons/conservation/journal/issue30/raman30/index.html](http://www.vam.ac.uk/res_cons/conservation/journal/issue30/raman30/index.html)

*Portrait Of An Unknown Woman*, Levina Teerlinc, c. 1560. Victoria & Albert Museum, London, P.48-1984

*Portrait of Jane Small, formerly known as Mrs Robert Pemberton*, Hans Holbein, c. 1540. Victoria & Albert Museum, London, P.40&A-1935

*Portrait Of An Unknown Woman (Unfinished)*, Nicholas Hilliard, c. 1575-1580. Victoria & Albert Museum, London, P.8-1947

*The Heneage (Armada) Jewel*, Nicholas Hilliard, c. 1595. Victoria & Albert Museum, London, M.81-1935

*Portrait of Anne of Cleves*, Hans Holbein, 1539. Victoria & Albert Museum, London, P.153:1, 2-1910

## Appendix 1: Frames

The frames in which these miniatures are set are not part of the entry, but only for display. They are made of pewter, decorated with plastic drop pearls. The design of the frames is similar to Holbein's miniature of Mrs. Jane Small (Fig. 5), with a loop at the top and three pendant pearls on the sides and bottom. This type of frame is designed to be worn, and in the case of the Holbein miniature there is a hinged cover (Fig. 6) that protects the painting. The Heneage Jewel (Fig. 7) has both a lid and a piece of glass covering the miniature. Other miniatures were placed inside round cases turned from wood or ivory, also with lids. (Fig. 8)



Fig. 5: *Mrs. Jane Small*, Hans Holbein, 1536. An example of a metal frame with a loop at the top and three pendant pearls.



Fig. 6: *Mrs. Jane Small*, Hans Holbein, 1536. The lid of the frame in Fig. 5 features the Pemberton arms (the subject's maiden name) painted on a piece of vellum.



Fig. 7: *The Heneage Jewel*, Nicholas Hilliard, c. 1595. This miniature has both a metal lid and a glass cover over the portrait.



Fig. 8: *Anne of Cleves*, Hans Holbein, 1539. This portrait is set in a turned ivory box with a lid. The box was likely made in Germany while Holbein was painting Anne at the request of her prospective new husband, Henry VIII.