

THE INTIMATE ART

By John Biguenet, *The Oxford American*, Fall 2005

THE *New York Times* recently carried a short article about an artist, Ellen Harvey, who, a few years back, painted forty landscape miniatures on New York walls already defaced by graffiti. The small, oval paintings, reminiscent in subject and style of artists like Albert Bierstadt and Casper David Friedrich, have – as their painter anticipated – nearly all been destroyed now, six years later. The *Times* writer, Kathryn Shattuck, explained, “There were few remnants; most had ended up, with the walls that held them, in rubble heaps or painted over by others who thought their own work more beautiful.”

In a certain sense, that has also been the fate of the genre in which Ms. Harvey worked. Though it flourished for centuries as a major European and American portraiture tradition, the miniature has all but disappeared today, except for the work of a few contemporary miniaturists such as Thomas Sully.

The great-great-grandson of the renowned nineteenth-century portraitist of the same name, Sully, a native of Norfolk, Virginia, has been a costume painter for the American Ballet Theatre and the New York City Ballet as well as an illustrator for *The New Yorker*. Having moved from Charleston to New Orleans earlier this year, he has been sought after in the Crescent City (and the rest of the South) for his portrait miniatures of families and, occasionally, their pets. He has also undertaken a series of the strangest and most haunting of miniatures, the eye portrait.

Like his famous forebear, Sully was a full-scale portraitist with a flourishing career for a number of years. But “Love and Loss: American Portrait and Mourning Miniatures,” an exhibition he attended in 2001 at the Gibbes Museum of Art in Charleston, piqued his interest, and his devotion to the difficult genre has grown ever since. “I love portrait miniatures for their intimacy,” he explains. “They sustain a current between the dead and the living, the absent and the present, those separated by the vagaries of life and geography, or even the daily routine.”

Though the Louvre contains a circa 1460 portrait miniature in enamel by Jean Fouquet, the tradition is generally agreed to have begun around 1520 with Jean Clouet’s seven circular portraits, each about two inches in diameter, which appeared among his decorations of the manuscript of *La Guerre gallique*. Dale T. Johnson’s invaluable catalogue for the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s exhibition, “Tokens of Affection: The Portrait Miniature in America,” notes that in the same decade as Clouet, Luke Hornebolte of Ghent originated the vogue for portrait miniatures in England, which flowered into wide popularity during the reign of Henry VIII.

Though it may seem, at first, a rather academic point, Johnson stresses the transformative impact of the changes in the materials employed by miniaturists over the centuries. Hornebolte, for example, used watercolors on vellum to create his delicate portraits, then pasted them to playing cards, a technique also used by Nicolas Hilliard, the portraitist to Queen Elizabeth. For nearly two centuries, watercolors on vellum remained the medium of the miniature.

Enamel on copper briefly supplanted the traditional technique in the first half of the eighteenth century. By mid-century, though, that new approach had yielded to watercolors on ivory, presenting both a superior support but a formidable technical problem to the artist. Johnson admires ivory’s luminous aesthetic virtues as a base for portraits but notes that “paint does not easily adhere to the slippery, nonporous surface.”

With the international trade in ivory now illegal, Sully has experimented with watercolors on ivorine (the same material from which ping-pong balls are extruded), an experience that has left him sympathetic to earlier miniaturists who confronted the unforgiving medium: “you need to work with considerable patience, building up the layers slowly, each layer being slightly more receptive to paint than the previous one. Any revision is likely to result in the loss of all

previously applied color right down to the support, so you have to paint with confidence.” (Convinced of the superiority of ivory to vellum for portraiture, Sully is currently looking into a rather extraordinary alternative: ten-thousand-year-old woolly-mammoth tusks recently uncovered in Siberia and legally available to import.)

It is perhaps fitting that portrait miniatures have been painted, with few exceptions, on supports drawn from the carcasses of animals, since the portraits themselves are typically inspired by loss of one kind or another. Whether presented from a loved one to a traveler about to embark on a long journey, or commissioned by the grieving survivors of the recently dead, the small portrait could be worn on the body as an emblem of human protest against separation and as a token of constant, undying affection.

This emphasis on the transience of love and life is chillingly explicit in mourning portraits. The back of the case holding the image of the deceased, for example, frequently was decorated with plaited hair cut from the corpse beneath a golden monogram of the subject’s name. Even more unsettling, the artist, using a mortar and pestle, often dissolved the chopped hair of the dead in the paint used for the portrait.

Thomas Sully’s only mourning portrait is of a Charleston neighbor, Mrs. Leither A.D. Weaver. Painted for her family in 2004 as a tribute to his late friend, the portrait miniature is a 3 ¼ by 2 ½ inch watercolor on vellum. Resplendent in a long, beaded necklace and crowned by a feathery white hat suggestive of a halo surrounding the wisps of her curls, Mrs. Weaver serves as a study in browns, greens, and blues. Only the blood-red strokes of the artist’s monogram and the year of the painting’s composition, interrupting the crosshatched background at the edge of the golden oval frame that encases the portrait, hint at the mortality of its vibrant subject.

Sully sees the connection to love and loss as intrinsic to the genre of portrait miniatures:

In a secular way, they possess some of the sacred power of the icons of Byzantium and Russia, which served as charged conduits between the viewer and the subject of the painting. And when they include the subject’s hair they take on some of the qualities of the reliquary.

Pampered as adored members of many households, pets, too, have been subjects of portraits for centuries. For instance, Queen Victoria and Prince Albert had their dogs painted by Sir Edwin Landseer, a consummate dog portraitist. Among the monarch’s dogs was a Pekingese from the Chinese royal court. And as it happens, Sully’s newest portrait miniature, *Theseus*, is of a member of that breed. Sully chose the pattern of a Chinese silk robe for the background of the painting because the dog’s owners “clearly regard their companion as worthy of mythical attributes.”

Sully, who is determined to expand the portrait miniature genre to include canines, began his painting of pets with a portrait that has great emotional resonance for him, as he describes in the following note:

My first dog miniature was of my late Welsh Terrier, Pinckney, whose loss was devastating. I painted him when he was alive and didn’t realize that this would soon become a mourning piece. I intend to have him reframed with an aperture in the back to house a locket of his black and tan hair, which I prudently saved. In the highly nuanced language of mourning art, hair symbolizes eternity and transcendence of mortality since it does not decay after we die.

THE INTIMATE POSSIBILITIES of a small, easily concealed form of art are nowhere more obvious than in the most startling and romantic of portrait miniatures, the eye portrait exchanged between lovers.

The origins of the genre of eye portraiture can be traced back to the future George IV of England. As the Prince of Wales, he began a liaison with Maria Fitzherbert, a once-married Roman Catholic. Unacceptable to the court as his consort, she commissioned a portrait by Richard Cosway of her right eye – a fragment of her countenance unrecognizable to anyone but her beloved, who wore the eye portrait beneath his lapel. The Prince Regent, in return, had a portrait of his eye set within a ring, which he presented the lady on her birthday. Taken with Mrs. Fitzherbert's romantic gesture in response to the prince's thwarted love, the Georgian elite, and eventually other classes of society, embraced such portraiture as a popular fashion from 1790 until about 1820.

The tradition of bestowing an eye portrait, usually in a lidded case or a locket, on a beloved led to one of the boldest portrait miniatures ever created. In 1828, Sarah Goodridge painted *Beauty Revealed (Self-Portrait)*, for a close friend, the famed Daniel Webster. Apparently, Miss Goodridge, a well-known Boston artist, left her home only twice during her life – on both occasions to visit Senator Webster in Washington: in 1828, following the death of Webster's wife, and in 1841, during his separation from his second wife. Miss Goodridge, who was referred to as Webster's "fiancée" by his descendants, was forty years old when she painted the miniature, a watercolor on ivory encased within a lidded frame, which depicts nothing more than her own naked breasts, surrounded by folds of cloth. A single mole on her right breast no doubt revealed, at least to one intimate with her body, the subject's identity.

On one occasion, at least, ardor also inspired Sully to create a special eye portrait. As he explains, "I painted my own eye as a gift to my wife. It is framed in a pendant that she can wear dangling from a choker – though some may find the sight of my eye peering out from her décolletage slightly unsettling."

The painting, *Self-Portrait, Eye*, only slightly more than an inch and a half in diameter, was the first in a series of eye portraits of artists he has undertaken. Rendered in a nearly symmetrical composition, the pale eye is inscrutable. A crack in the frame's glass, roughly following the horizontal axis of the portrait and passing just above the pupil, offers the only distraction from the mesmerizing gaze and calls attention to the transparent partition between the painter's eye and the viewer's, which can itself be glimpsed in reflection when the light is right.

The most striking example from Sully's series is *George Schmidt, His Eye*, a two-inch round watercolor on vellum, framed in rose gold. A noted New Orleans artist and cofounder of the New Leviathan Oriental Foxtrot Orchestra, Schmidt is fondly known in the city for a charmingly eccentric demeanor, vividly conveyed in the thumb-sized portrait. Emphasizing the unblinking stare of the sitter, the painting fixes the viewer with its centered black nailhead of a pupil and the surrounding blue iris, striated with reflections of light. The swirling eyebrow above and the wrinkled skin below create a vortex of intensity, restrained only slightly by the single glass lens of Schmidt's spectacles that barely veils the subject's implacable gaze.

What are we to make of the eye portrait, a work of art that regards us even more avidly than we contemplate it? The nineteenth century showed a keen interest in the optical experience of the world, in the question of what it is, exactly, that we see in the play of light. This fascination with the optic, expressed most notably in the invention of the camera and in the art of the Impressionist painters, marked the end of a number of habits of perception that had persisted for hundreds, and in some cases thousands, of years. Is it a mere coincidence, then, that the final expression of a portraiture tradition three centuries old should feature a framed eye staring back at the eye of the viewer, as if both squint at each other through the golden keyhole of a locked door?

Peter Galassi demonstrated in “Before Photography,” the groundbreaking 1981 exhibition he curated at the Museum of Modern Art exploring the influence of painters on the origins of photography, that this incipient obsession with optic reality at the end of the eighteenth century led inexorably to the mechanical reproduction of the visible world. And the means of that reproduction, the camera, played a major role in the decline of the portrait miniature.

In fact, the invention of the daguerreotype in 1839 is commonly regarded as the death knell of the tradition. As Johnson documents, “some ex-miniaturists found employment coloring photographs. Others continued to paint miniatures while also copying photographs and offered their clientele a choice of mediums.”

Johnson goes on to note a telling statistic: During 1830, the British Royal Academy included three hundred miniatures among its exhibition; by 1863, a mere thirty-three were displayed. Harry Wehle’s 1927 scholarly study, *American Miniatures, 1730-1850*, acknowledges the death of the genre as an acute image: “The miniature in the presence of the photograph was like a bird before a snake: it was fascinated – even to the fatal point of imitation – and then it was swallowed.”

What was lost when the portrait miniature yielded to the snapshot? Sully asserts that “the camera is a wonderful tool, but it is only a machine. The painted portrait miniature is the culmination of thousands of marks that originate in the artist’s brain and heart, his hand guided by sentiment, memory, empathy, and constant evaluation of personality and character.”

IN THE END, the portrait miniature is not a memento mori but a tiny bulwark thrown up by the imagination against loss. And as Sully recently learned firsthand, part of its genius in resisting oblivion is paradoxically what would seem to make it more vulnerable to destruction, the diminutive size that characterizes the miniature.

Alice Ravenel Huger Smith comments on the genre’s surprising longevity in describing some nineteenth-century miniatures of Charles Fraser in Charleston: “Most of them have had adventurous existences, surviving war and fire and flood, treasured, but sharing the family fortunes almost like individuals and possibly all the more loved for any resulting blemish.”

Similarly, the catastrophic flooding of New Orleans this past summer offered Sully’s miniatures their first taste of disaster. As the artist explains:

I recently learned a new advantage to working in this genre when I had to hurriedly evacuate my New Orleans home and studio. As Hurricane Katrina bore down on the city, we were rattled and apprehensive as we faced the apocalypse. Can you imagine what would have gone through the minds of the citizens of Pompeii and Herculaneum had they had television to forecast their doom? I put the dozen or so miniatures I had in the studio at the time into a box, along with my watercolors, brushes, some pieces of vellum, a frame, and my late dog’s ashes, and fled the approaching floodwaters through howling winds.

It was yet another example of Thomas Sully saving the portrait miniature from extinction – just as the portrait miniature has attempted over the centuries to save its subjects from the same fate.