LESSONS IN LINE; THE IMPORTANCE OF DRAWING FOR LIMNERS

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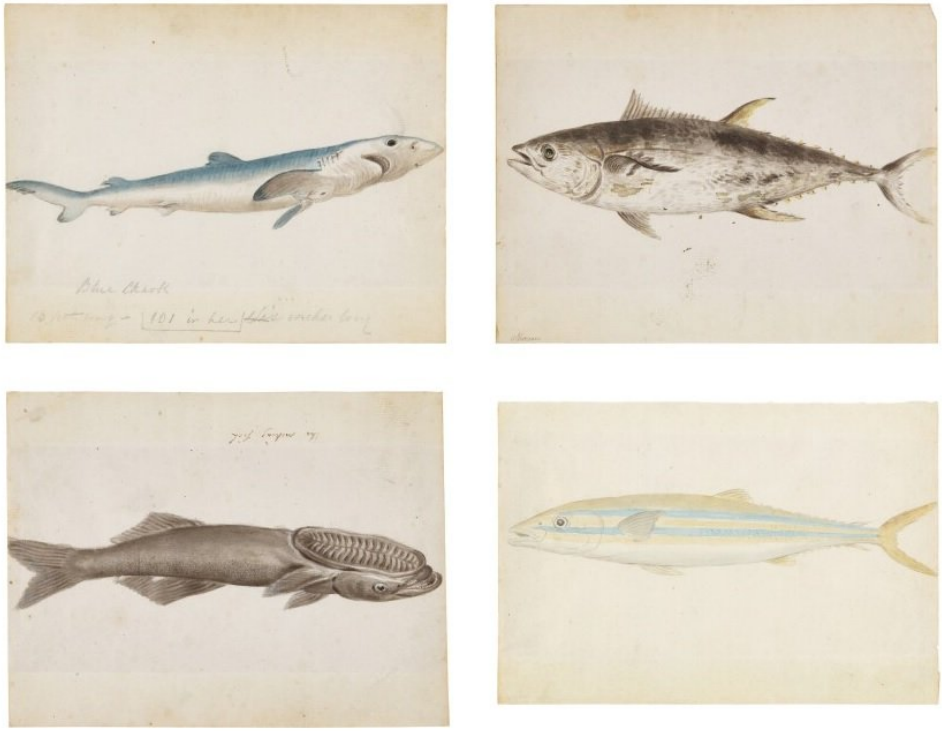
Ann Bermingham prefaces her text Learning to Draw (New Haven & London, 2000) with ‘As early as the sixteenth century, drawing in England came to be seen as something more than an activity exclusive to artists – it became a polite and useful art,

a practice of everyday life.'[1] Although sometimes considered less important than the more salient forms of painting and sculpture, the appeal of drawing to artists persisted beyond studious purpose. In fact, for many craftsmen, importantly Limners, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries drawing provided them with a plethora of possibilities, both formally and informally, beyond the constraints of their medium.

One example of where it served a useful purpose is the genre of portrait drawings. With the turn of nineteenth century and the Royal Watercolour Society's first public exhibition in 1804, a new appreciation for the genre was ushered in and portraits by miniaturists on paper became increasingly fashionable. Unlike traditional watercolourists, miniaturists were hindered by the size of the ivory discs onto which they could paint. Not only were larger pieces of ivory prone to splits and cracks, but the high level of detail required took far longer in this larger format than was economically viable for artists. Drawing in many ways became a solution for miniaturists who took their talent for precision and transferred it to works on paper so that could be hung upon a wall and appeal to this new marketplace.

Limners flourished in this freedom afforded by drawing, however it spread beyond their traditional practice and importantly into their informal studies. Both Richard Cosway (1742-1821) and John Smart (1741-1811) were trained at William Shipley's Drawing School, and although abandoned the formal practice of draughtsmanship in exchange for pursuing portraiture, continued to derive an extraordinary amount of pleasure through observational studies and appreciation of drawing indeed as a practice of everyday life. One particularly interesting example are Smart's Four Studies of Fish, executed in watercolour and pencil, that come from a sketchbook used by the artist on his return from India in 1795.[2]



John Smart, Four studies of fish, including a Blue Shark, an Albacore, a Sucking Fish and another; watercolour over pencil on laid paper, each 150 x 194 mm - Sotheby's 2023

These highly detailed aquatic drawings feel a world away from the exquisite portraits of East India Company Officials and British aristocrats that marked this period out as Smart's most celebrated. Whilst their precision further reiterates Smart's flair for clarity, they importantly suggest that the artist considered drawing to be a practice he could dip into around his commissions; one that would enable him to examine and appreciate subjects beyond the formality of a portrait.

Around the end of the eighteenth century, Smart had begun training his son, John Smart Jr (1776-1809), in the art of limning and it appears that this appreciation for drawing was similarly inherited. Executed in 1798, Smart Jr.'s pencil study of Philip Hobby Knight, after Holbein (Fig.1), displays an equally superb faculty.

Fig. 1John Smart Jnr, Drawing of Philip Hobby Knight, after Hans Holbein the Younger, 1798

- The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

The image derives from a drawing made by Hans Holbein the Younger (1497/8-1543) that was part of a series of gentlemen associated with the English Court between 1532 and 1543. Smart Jr. did not work from the original but instead copied an engraving by Francesco Bartolozzi that was part of a printed series titled Imitations of Original Drawings by Holbein, in the Collection of His Majesty, for the Portraits of Illustrious Persons in the Court of Henry VIII published in 1796.[3] Executed around the time Smart Jr. was being trained, it could be presumed that this volume was part of his father's collection and suggests that John Smart Sr. had both a heightened antiquarian interest Holbein and used these etchings as a way to study and emulate this talent in drawing.

Richard Cosway, the other leading miniaturist of the Regency period, was also a staunch admirer of the Old Masters. However, this went beyond interest as Cosway became widely known for his personal collection and talent as a consultant who was able to advise his wealthiest clients on the purchase of these works. The Royal Academy holds a dossier of Cosway's collection from 1791 and includes in its title 'the undoubted works of the great masters of the Florentine, Roman, Venetian, Lombard, Flemish, and Dutch schools.'[4] The classical themes of these paintings and drawings evidently bled into Cosway's own practice, and many of his works on paper serve as evidence for his verdant interest in the resurgence of neo-classicism.

One particularly elegant example of this is a small pen, brown ink and pencil drawing from the 1790s (Fig.2) that depicts a graceful woman reclining upon a chaise lounge. Executed with sweeping sinuous lines, the lady is depicted in a classically-inspired dress. Whilst no associated painting or drawing has been identified, the artist's heavy interest in Old Master paintings and drawings suggest inspiration to a certain extent. Cosway displayed a propensity for drawing from a very young age and studies of this sort appearing at the height of his career, in a form far from his finely executed portrait miniatures, show how drawing continued to not only inspire but encourage the artist in his ambition to become 'someday the greatest artist in London'.[5]

Fig. 2 Richard Cosway, Study of a Vestal Virgin, circa 1790s- The Limner Company

Whilst there has been a great deal discussed surrounding the importance of drawing for male limners, less has been examined on its significance for women artists. In fact, in many ways drawing opened the doors for women to enter the regulated world of portraiture and male-dominated spheres that demarked artistic society. As Catherine Tilney exclaims in Jane Austen's Northanger Abbey (1803), '…she confessed and lamented her want of knowledge, declared that she would give anything in the world to be able to draw…'. One successful female miniaturist who dipped between both drawing and limning was Emma Eleonora Kendrick (c.1788-1871), who was prominent at the same time as both John Smart and Richard Cosway. Having most likely received her formal artistic training under her father, the sculptor Joseph Kendrick, Emma, a member of the New Water-Colour Society, went onto exhibit her works at the Royal Academy of Art between 1811 and 1840. She often held royal patronage and her miniatures of British Nobility were praised for their depth of colour and heightened level of detail.

Kendrick's watercolours and drawings, albeit less known or appreciated than her miniatures, offer a fascinating insight into the woman as an artist. One in particular, an ink and wash study on paper (Fig.3), does not appear a world away from Cosway's Vestal Virgin. This work depicts an elegant woman glancing to something out of the left of the composition.

Fig. 3 Emma Eleanora Kendrick after Guercino, Sophonisba with the bowl of poison- The Limner Company

It is believed to have been copied from a work by Guercino (1591-1666) in the Royal Collection. Kendrick is known to have made watercolour copies of various 16th and 17th century Italian painters including masters including Niccolò dell'Abbate and Guercino. As a successful miniaturist in her own right, Kendrick appears to have turned to drawing for other purposes. This may have been for pleasure like Smart, studying an Old Master in a manner so as to broaden her studies beyond the formal constraints of typical portrait compositions, or like Cosway, seemingly turning to the Old Masters as a source of inspiration. However, what differentiates Kendrick's work from both Smart and Cosway's is the idea of a woman artist using watercolour and drawing as a vehicle through which she could engage and secure the idea of female craftsmanship throughout history.

In many ways then, drawing appears to have fallen hand in hand with limning during its height in Georgian and Regency England. Artists such as John Smart, Richard Cosway and Emma Eleanora Kendrick turned to the medium in a break from the constraints of limning materials. With a heightened commercial interest in the genre, artists also used drawing in a practical manner. However, in the works than appear furthest from the formality of portrait miniatures, the most is discovered about the artist. From the sea creature drawings of John Smart on his way back from India to Kendrick's reimagining of revered masterworks, the pleasure derived from drawing appears to have had a profound influence upon the artist in their examination of the natural and social world around.

[1] Ann Bermingham, Learning to Draw: Studies in the Cultural History of a Polite and Useful Art, New Haven & London, 2000.

[2]Sold, Sotheby's London, Old Master & British Works on Paper, 6th July 2023, lot 153. - https://www.sothebys.com/en/buy/auction/2023/old-master-british-works-on-paper/four-studies-of-fish

[3] The portrait of Philip Hobby is plate 39. John Smart Jr.'s drawing is now held in the collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, accension number: 2022.25.1. https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/854137

[4]For more information see the catalogue entry on the Royal Academy Website (record number 23/431): https://royalacademy.org.uk/art-artists/book/a-catalogue-of-the-entire-collection-of-pictures-of-richard-cosway-esq-r-a (accessed: 21st July 2023).

[5] G.C. Williamson, Richard Cosway, R.A., and His Wife and Pupils: Miniaturists of the Eighteenth Century, (London, 1897), p. 1.

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