

NARRATIVE ACCESSORIES: WEARABLE MINIATURES FROM THE ELIZABETHANS TO THE VICTORIANS

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A particularly magnificent [ring depicting George III \(1738-1820\) by Jeremiah Meyer \(1735-1789\) \[RCIN 422280\]](#) is currently on display at The Queen's Gallery in an exhibition titled *Style & Society: Dressing the Georgians*. Meyer was a founding member of the Royal Academy and one of the most celebrated miniaturists of the 18th century having been appointed miniature painter to Queen Charlotte (1744-1818) in 1764 and enamellist to George III a decade later. His works were renowned for their precision and were described by a contemporary critic to 'excel all others in pleasing Expression, Variety of Tints and Freedom of Execution'.

Wearable miniatures like this ring reached an apex of popularity during the Georgian and Victorian eras where they graced the hands, wrists and décolletages of members from the highest echelons of society. The present ivory miniature, encircled by a ring of diamonds, was given by King George III, alongside other exquisite pieces of jewellery, to his new wife to wear on their wedding day on 8th September 1761. The exhibition held at the Queen's Gallery at Buckingham Palace displays this ring alongside other extraordinary historical pieces ranging from royal gowns to formal portraits, highlighting it and other wearable miniatures as integral accessories to the most important of outfits during the Hanoverian period.

That being said, wearable miniatures were widely favoured from as early as the 16th century when Queen Elizabeth I (1533-1603) commissioned numerous pieces of jewellery for courtiers bearing her likeness. One delicate example is a pendant miniature of the Queen by Nicholas Hilliard (1547-1619) from circa 1585 [fig. 1]. The size of this token suggests that was possibly worn as an earring, which became a popular fashion towards the end of the sixteenth century and often only worn in one ear.



Pendant with portrait miniature of Queen Elizabeth I by Nicholas Hilliard, Royal Collection Trust

Fig. 1 Nicholas Hilliard (1547-1619), Pendant with a miniature of Elizabeth I, circa. 1585-1600

© Royal Collection Trust.

During the English Civil War however, wearable miniatures served an alternative diplomatic purpose and rings displaying the profile of Charles I (1600-1649) were distributed amongst Royalist supporters to display their sponsorship of the monarchy. Similar political rings set with the portrait of William III (1650-1702) [fig. 2] were received by members of his Court and continued to act as signs of loyalty during the reigns of George II (1683-1760) and George III (1738-1820).[1]



Gold ring with portrait miniature of King William III

Fig. 2 English School, circa 1702, William III, King of England (1650 – 1702), watercolour on ivory set into the bezel of a gold ring - The Limner Company

Towards the end of the 18th century, the setting of miniatures became increasingly opulent and artists often worked with jewellers to surround their portraits in a halos of pearls or precious stones. Wearable miniatures continued to be given and received as gifts, however, instead as declarations of political loyalty, they were more commonly exchanged as tokens of friendship and affection. Perhaps the most intimate of these forms were lover's eyes - see for example, [an eye miniature in the collection of the Victoria & Albert Museum \[P.56-1977\]](#). Unlike other portrait miniatures, these dainty pieces only portrayed an eye and were often no larger than a fingernail creating a deeply intimate impression in their emulation of the romantic gaze. Central to this allure and effect was the mystery surrounding the seemingly anonymous identity of their sitters. Concealed by a closely-cropped composition, the meaning behind lover's eyes was exceedingly personal and the pieces were intended to be held close to the wearer in brooches, rings or pendants.

Other examples of wearable miniatures were not always as elusive as lover's eyes and, as portable forms of wealth, prominently adorned the wrists, dress and décolletages of their aristocratic wearers. One piece in particular that stands out is the five stringed pearl and portrait miniature bracelet featured in a painting by Anton Raphael Mengs (1728-1779) of Maria Luisa of Spain (1745-1792) [fig. 3]. Painted upon the event of Maria's marriage to Leopold, the Grand Duke, in 1764, this magnificent portrait was intended to portray her immense wealth and beauty.[2] The pearl stringed miniature, which presumably depicts a portrait of Leopold, hanging from Maria's left wrist only further communicates this point, particularly as the Duchess's right hand touches the piece and further draws the viewer's eye to its opulence.



Marriage portrait of María Luisa of Spain wearing portrait miniature bracelet

Fig. 3 Anton Raphael Mengs (1728-1779), María Luisa of Spain, 1764, oil on canvas. Collection: The Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna. © The Kunsthistorisches Museum

During the 18th century, a string of pearls that matched in size and colour would often command a greater price than jewels and it therefore comes as no surprise that such an accessory was to be given great attention by the artist in his painting of the newly married Duchess. Such a style was not exclusive to the continent, and Queen Victoria was widely portrayed by artists wearing an ornamental enamel portrait of her beloved Prince Albert upon her wrist in many state portraits both before and after his death in 1861.

In many ways, the very nature of portrait miniatures meant that they were inextricably associated with jewellery from their advent in the 16th century. Dainty and portable, their practical size and shape encouraged a plethora of wearable possibilities. Whether this was to display political loyalty or personal affection, wearable miniatures told a story and today, whether they survive on their own or as a painting within a painting, offer historians a fascinating insight into the symbolic importance of jewellery in the centuries predating photography and commercial printing.

1] Diane Scarisbrick elaborates further on the political use of rings in her book *Rings: Symbols of Wealth, Power and Affection*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1993, p. 127

2] Maria went onto become Holy Roman Empress when Leopold succeeded the position on the death of his childless brother Joseph II in 1790.

Bethany Perry is a freelance researcher and writer based in London. She previously worked for Sotheby's in their Impressionist & Modern and Modern British Art Departments and prior to that was a Graduate Intern at Philip Mould & Co. Contact: bethanygperry@gmail.com.