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SMALL PLEASURES

***Commissioned by the wealthy elite as mementos and gifts, portrait miniatures occupy a unique place in the history of art, finds* Emma Longstaff**

Images of the human face are everywhere – on television, social media, advertising and video calls, not to mention the thousands of photos of friends, children and pets we carry around with us on our smartphones. It's easy to forget that, centuries ago, only the very wealthiest people could afford to commission artists to record their faces for posterity.

The practice of painting portraits in miniature emerged in the European royal courts in the 1500s. The earliest were given as diplomatic gifts, and Elizabeth I is said to have worn portraits of favoured courtiers at her breast. Around 200 years later, portrait miniatures were popular with the fashionable elite – not just dukes and duchesses, but newly minted merchants and manufacturers. By the mid 19th century, miniature painting was supplanted by the wondrous new invention of photography.

Most miniatures were a few inches in size: the smallest barely an inch. Originally produced in watercolour on card, copper, or vellum (calfskin), by the 1750s most were painted onto thin slices of ivory. Paint sat on the polished surface of the ivory, giving the portraits a more ▶



ABOVE Victorian gold mourning bracelet with inset ivory portrait miniature of a gentleman, sold for £1,700 at Gorringe's. **FACING PAGE, TOP ROW** Elizabethan miniature by Nicholas Hilliard; Thomas Fones, Mayor of Plymouth, by Isaac Oliver; 1786 watercolour on ivory by Ozias Humphry, all *Philip Mould & Company*. **MIDDLE ROW** Miniature of Major John Cornwall by S Coles, 1778; miniature by William Wood c1800; large miniature of an officer by J Pastorini c1810, all Nicky Gould. **BOTTOM ROW** Watercolour on vellum by Richard Gibson c1670; young nobleman by Alexander Cooper c1635; Admiral Sir Philip Charles Henderson Calderwood Durham GCB by Abraham or Joseph Daniel, c1793–93, all *Philip Mould & Company*.









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Emma was interviewed for an article on portrait miniatures, 'Small Pleasures', in the May 2022 issue of Homes & Antiques magazine.