

MAY 01, 2022

Collecting



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 1600s. 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 1700s most were painted onto thin slices of ivory. Paint set on the polished surface of the ivory, giving the portraits a more

ABOVE Victorian gold securing brooch with inset ivory portrait miniature of a gentleman, sold for £1,700 at Goringe's. **FACING PAGE, TOP ROW** Elizabethan miniature by Nicholas Hilliard, Thomas Fene, Mayor of Plymouth, by Isaac Oliver, 1778, watercolour on ivory by Simon Humphrey, all Philip Mould & Company. **MIDDLE ROW** Miniature of George John Cornwall by S. Cotes, 1778, miniature by William Wood c1800, large miniature of an officer by J. Pastorelli 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 Dornan GCB by Abraham or Joseph Daniel, c1793-95, all Philip Mould & Company.





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