



FRENCH SCHOOL (18th century)

Miniature painting of a Seascape with fishermen in the foreground

Fixé-sous-verre

Miniature paintings of still lifes and landscapes enjoyed a surge in popularity in late eighteenth-/early nineteenth-century Europe, specifically in France and Flemish and Dutch cities. An artist's ability to capture a landscape on such a small size, was a true exercise in skill; and even on this scale, landscapes were intended to evoke a sense of the sublime.

These compositions, rich in symbolism, were profoundly influenced by the seventeenth-century Dutch tradition. The pastoral landscape had been a recurring motif in Dutch art, depicting a harmonious relationship between humans and nature, or man and God's bounty.[1] As in the present example, figures included in a scene were either idealised going about their work, or portrayed enjoying a respite from labour amidst their picturesque surroundings, promoting a peaceful existence between man and nature, and man and the Divine. However, the viewer was typically reminded of the fragility of this balance with a distant threat, such as the storm cloud in the background here.

At the forefront of still life and landscape miniature painting was the fixé-sous-verre (fixed under glass) technique. Also known as the 'eludoric' method, this artistic approach has been practiced in the West since antiquity. The technique involves painting on the reverse side of a piece of glass, the artist's perspective therefore being the reverse orientation to that of the viewer. Unlike conventional canvas painting, or painting on vellum or ivory in miniature, where artists would typically begin with broad sketches, gradually adding details, the fixé-sous-verre painters start with the finer details and work their way towards the background.[2] Meticulous planning is required, with the artist envisioning the entire composition from start to finish, whilst taking into account the mirror effect that occurs during the painting process.

The technique was introduced in Venice during the Middle Ages, achieving maturity by the Renaissance, largely due to the influence of Byzantine glassmakers on the island of Murano. These

Murano glassmakers subsequently emigrated to other European cities in Italy, Austria, Germany, France and the Netherlands, spreading the fixé-sous-verre technique and adapting it to new themes and styles.

In the second half of the eighteenth-century, Arnaud Vincent de Montpetit (1713-1800) refined the technique. De Montpetit created oil paintings on fine cloth submerged in water, the paintings were then affixed to the back of an embossed glass using water-soluble glue (typically animal glue). By this point, numerous workshops drew inspiration from renowned painters like Francois Boucher, Chardin and Hubert Robert to decorate precious boxes using fixé-sous-verre. These works were characterized by their meticulous craftsmanship and thematic richness, reflecting the influence of contemporary painting trends.

[1] Miniature Painting in Eighteenth-Century England: The Case of William Pether (1739–1821)

[2] Le fixé sous verre: l'art de la peinture inversée, La Magazine de Proantic, 2014