

## **The Differences Between Small Paintings and Miniature Art.**

*An adaptation of a talk given by Marilyn Peck to the Australian Society of Miniature Art (Q1d) Inc on 14/12/2002.*

The differences between small paintings and the miniature took me about nine years to work out for myself. So, first, I will tell you about the history of the contemporary Miniature Art movement in Australia from 1985 until now. I am using the word contemporary to describe the art of today.

I will tell you about framing and the differences between the Australian standards, UK, Canada and America. I'll continue with the miniature painting standards, in each of those countries, then the difference between a miniature and a small painting. I will also give you some tips on how to create your own miniature.

We started the societies in Sydney in 1985 with only one miniaturist to tell us what it was all about. Her name was Yvonne Perron and she told us about her work. Amongst other things, she illustrated children's books and was gifted in painting flowers animals and birds. She described her method of painting, showed us her brushes and magnifying glasses.

Her words probably didn't help us much at the time. We were all determined that there would be minimal rules placed on the members. We would follow general art rules and make the size of the painted image 16 square inches.

We thought that big frames would make the artwork seem more important than would small frames. This concept still prevails, the bigger the better.

Quite often we would frame multiple paintings within the one mount and frame.

When judgements started being made by the first selection committees, the size of the painted image was nearly always the limit of 4 x 4 inches or 16 square inches.

I am going to continue using imperial measurements, because the American, Canadian and the English use imperial, not metric.

We discovered that a small artwork in a big frame needed bright colour to make an impact. We also discovered that the general perception of the Australian buying public and the gallery directors, was that the miniature art in small frames was a craft, and was not to be taken very seriously. The first arts and crafts exhibitions placed us in the craft sections.

The societies worked for the next ten years to change this perception. Miniature art is not a craftwork, although the craft of miniaturism is important. Miniature Art is fine art of a particular dimension. Its history goes back beyond its golden period of the 13th century.

The influence of the European and American miniaturists, and their societies gradually began to permeate through to our Australian members. In 1996 the big breakthrough came, when the ASMA (QLD) Inc established their annual international awards. Thanks to the Gold Coast City Art Gallery and council help, this venue has been available each year, with one break at the BC Fine Art Gallery.

Of course you will have noticed in the overseas artworks that are sent to the awards, that the framing of the miniature is quite unimportant. It does not overpower the artwork. In contrast, the Australian standard framing takes precedence over the painted area. I am speaking about a standard frame with mount and glass, 10 x 10 inches, that is 100 square inches, or slightly bigger.

The Sydney Royal Easter Show limits the frame for a miniature to 12 x 12 inches, which is 144 square inches. I prefer this larger frame size, when I am exhibiting in Australia. Before the Sydney miniaturists persuaded them to change to this size the limit was much smaller.

In America the size of the painted area is sometimes larger than the measurement allowable in Australia. America allows the painted area to be up to 5 x 5 inches, that is 25 square inches. However the American standard framing size is much smaller than Australia. MASF allows a maximum size of 8 x 8 inches, which is 64 square inches. In many other shows in America the frame limit is smaller than that allowed by Florida.

In England and Canada the framing and mount allowance is smaller again. The framed miniature must not exceed 7 x 5 inches for rectangles and ovals, or 4 ins x 4.5 inches for squares or circles. The rules for the framing dictate the area for the painted image. Therefore the maximum painted image is much smaller than in America.

Now we come to the nutty gritty of the image in the small frame. A loosely painted small painting may look okay in a large frame, but it doesn't qualify to be thought of as a miniature.

A small-framed miniature requires fine detail and a lot of it. It can still be loose and spontaneous at first glance, but it can and must be greatly detailed. It certainly doesn't have to be representational or what is generally thought of as traditional. These terms are sometimes considered to be very off-putting to the artist approaching the very disciplined art form of the miniature for the first time.

The Australian societies from the first wanted to encourage all forms of miniature art in all of its many diverse forms. It seems very sad to me that this concept has been lost in at least one of the four societies. The Australian societies have always resisted rules such as the one-sixth rule until now. Possibly in the first years, because none thought that it was possible to produce works using that rule. It was thought that the rule was too restrictive.

All that was said in the societies' guidelines was that there should be some miniaturisation if the artwork was representational. This led to small landscapes being quite acceptable as miniatures, because they fitted into those rather loose rules.

The one-sixth rule means that a representational subject must be no larger than one sixth of its actual size. For example, the MASF entry form explains that an adult head measures from the forehead to the chin about 9 inches. One-sixth of the actual size of the head is 1 - 1.5 inches.

There are a few things the artist can do to produce miniatures without radically changing styles or the pleasure in painting them. The first thing to realise is that your painted image will have to stand magnification by selection committees to see if you have made mistakes. And the more minute detail you can put into your artwork the better as far as they are concerned.

- Use some form of magnifying glass as an aid to getting your work more detailed. I use magnifiers attached to my reading glasses. I have also a desk magnifier with light attachment.
- Use tiny acrylic brushes called liners. They are used to detail and sharpen any areas in your composition that are too loose and fuzzy. You use liners while looking through your magnifying glass.
- Use small practice mounts cut to the size that you require the preferred finished artwork to be. And use them often while your masterpiece is progressing. You can make them yourself or get your framer to cut them for you.
- Use smaller sized paint supports or base, than you usually do. I mean here the base that supports the paint or whatever you prefer to paint on, such as paper as a base, Ivorine, canvas, board, piano-keys or postage stamps.

If you start on a postage stamp as a first attempt you will be very surprised at how easy a slightly bigger surface will seem to you.

There are all manner of ways, published in books that are completely boring to get you down to the amount of detail required by selection committees, before you ever get to be hung or judged. These books explain such things as how many pencil marks, stipples or brushstrokes you can fit into a square inch.

You may say as we did in 1985, "But who wants to be tripped up with the technicalities when you are in that wonderful space where you are being creative? Artists shouldn't be trammelled by nit-picking martinetes regarding the

craft of the miniature".

It took me from 1985 until about 1994 to feel that I was at last getting the hang of it, but not all the time. I started out with landscapes in Australia that were small paintings. Now I exhibit in most of the overseas shows and have won quite a few awards so my miniatures are being judged against other miniaturists of international standard. My miniatures are neither traditional nor representational. They are being considered as creative figurative surreal abstractions! I get a lot of comment about them. They are my own design, and I find the images as I go along. I don't plan them.

In conclusion, it really gets down to the question about whether you want to be considered a true miniaturist exhibiting with the internationals both in Australia and overseas, or a painter of small paintings.