

## **The Photo-Miniature and Modern Paint-Overs**

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There has been a disturbing trend over the past year that has been brought to my attention: reports of award-winning paintings being painted over prints. While I trusted the sources of these reports, it became a personal issue when I was duped alongside my wife, Rachelle, while judging a miniature show online this past spring. I patiently waited through a variety of new reports for October to arrive when I would have the opportunity alongside fellow jurors at MASF to examine some of these potential works in person. With dismay, we all confirmed the reports. In some cases, a jeweler's loupe was necessary to clearly see the printed matrix underneath the layers of paint. In others, areas of the image were left uncovered and were detectable to the naked eye or with a magnifier.

Upon digging into the matter, I learned that suspicions, and even rejections of works from shows, have been going on for over a decade but no formal attempt was made to stop the offenses. As a historian, and now a juror/judge with my own credibility on the line, I decided to pursue the matter by contacting shows, societies and artists to determine what was going on and their feelings on the matter. It was a unanimous reply that such works would not be considered "original" in miniature art shows and that steps would be taken to stop the practice (intended as deception or not).

It is general knowledge that photography had disastrous effects upon the art of miniature painting and most of us comprehend the damage done to the business of miniaturists over the loss of their outlet for personal mementoes. However, few realize the secondary issues that actually were the impetus for the formation of our first miniature art societies in the 1890's. These problems all hinged specifically on the photo-miniature as I covered in depth in the book, *Modern Masters of Miniature Art in America*. Their parallel to these modern intrusions bears examination.

The photo-miniature was essentially a paint-over in which an artist worked over top of a faint photographic image printed directly upon the surface of the ivory. In its simplest form this could be called a tinted photograph or a painted photo. They developed in photography studios to gain more market share on the colorful miniature painting. While distinct in nature, some unscrupulously promoted these as "original miniatures", and they found their way into art exhibitions and the hands of unsuspecting collectors. The miniature art societies were formed to both educate about these deceptive works as well as restrict their inclusion within exhibitions.

Our modern responsibilities are the same and are compounded by the greater variety within our genre today and the advances in the digital age of potential hybrids, especially hand-embellished giclees. We accept a wide variety of tools for reference and design but not when used as a physical substrate that becomes essentially a paint-by-number.

While recognizing some benefits of photography, early societies stressed the ability to work from life. They found most troublesome, not the blatant photo-miniature itself, but rather the proliferation of mediocre work being submitted by artists accustomed to paint-overs and those that deliberately emulated the look of a photograph. In those days, just as today, the miniature art genre was struggling to be recognized as fine art and not merely something done for easy money. The miniature art societies were formed to raise the prestige of their genre by rising above this commercial reputation attached to photo-miniatures.

It is a shame that our leaders, juries and judges have an additional burden placed upon them, but rest assured, they are committed to the preservation and promotion of our endearing art form. I encourage everyone to read *Modern Masters of Miniature Art in America* and use it, and the abundant citations, as a tool to gain further knowledge into the enchanting world of miniature art!

Our modern goals are the same in our quest for excellence and recognition. We must guard ourselves not only from deceptive practices but also shortcuts that leave our work as “good enough” when it should be outstandingly impressive.

#### Recommendations:

1. Do what you can to spread the standards established by our miniature art societies as reflected on their websites and literature. Most of them will likely be instituting new wording to help combat this trend.
2. Copy, or link to this article, to help spread the information. Please do not alter the wording on the original document.
3. Investigate the matter for yourself. The full text of *Modern Masters of Miniature Art* is available online for free and contains full citations of endnotes to explore the topics in the book at greater depth.
4. Join the societies as an active member if you have not done so already!