

Does Size Matter In Miniature Art?

By Wes Siegrist, October 2011

Adapted and Expanded from Modern Masters of Miniature Art in America



The Author, Wes Siegrist, admiring art of vastly different size

Historical Quote (1899): The first limitation of a miniature is the size ... a miniature must always be designed for close inspection. It is meant to be held in the hand, to be pored over, even to be looked at with a magnifying glass ... *Barbara Hamley*ⁱ

Historical Quote (1901): [The] ... matter of size has always acted as a slur on the esteem in which miniatures have been held. *Charles de Kay*ⁱⁱ

This notion of the smaller being equal to, or even greater than, the larger is atypical. Viewers stop and gape at the monumental but rarely pause to notice the miniscule unless it is forced upon them. Miniatures on display never flaunt but whisper for attention.ⁱⁱⁱ The scholar, J. L. ProPERT's analogy between the Regent and Koh-I-Noor diamonds in comparison to a boulder on a hillside dramatically condenses these thoughts and the reward that inspecting the miniature can provide to those who take the time to see.^{iv} Miniatures, through constraints in size and scale, either inherent or designed, beg inspection by concealment. A glance intrigues us but what we examine further, up close and even under magnification, is what captivates us.

The derivative sources for miniature had no explicit references to size. Manuscript illuminations varied by size according to the format of the pages and detached limnings' smaller dimensions owed more to function than design. As noted by Bradley, and further delineated in Modern Masters of Miniature Art in America by Siegrist, manuscript illuminations and detached miniatures are not identical art forms.^v Understanding these differences is critical to the arguments for the importance of size with respect to detached miniatures.

Size, as inherently perceived in miniatures, was dictated by function as these delicate mementoes were primarily intended to be portable. Additionally, subject miniatures, often referred to as histories, were ordered as reductions in size and scale of larger works. Despite scholarly diatribes on the subject and whether or not any conscious thought was given to dimensions by the early miniaturists, their extant body of work was overwhelmingly small and repeatedly contrasted with larger works over the past 500 years.^{vi} The common vernacular of referring to limnings as works 'in little' implies small size as well as scale to the public, patrons

and practicing artists. The cementing of size in the definition is demonstrated by the wide acceptance through the generations that this branch of the arts equates with anything extremely small and tiny. In spite of etymologies seemingly at odds with this result, the attribute held steadfast, and progressively miniatures were described by size. —^{vii}

By the 1600s small size was seen as intrinsic to miniature. Limits on dimensions were non-existent but common perceptions limited miniatures to portable, held-in-the-hand formats. Works growing larger than the average, often called ‘cabinet’ miniatures, are referred to with non-typical adjectives: large, huge and even gargantuan.^{viii} It should be equally noted that extremely small works are often singled out and described as a departure from the norm, but tantamount to the argument that diminutive size contributes to the definition of miniature, these minute works are not considered precursors to a new art form or reactionary attempts to compete with other established art forms.^{ix} Historic miniature art size limitations hinged upon available working surfaces. Techniques were introduced to allow for ivory veneers and thin sheets of marble but even these had their limits. Additionally, the level of effort, patience and financial compensation proportionately increased with these larger sizes contributing to their rarity and oddity in the comprehensive oeuvre of the class.^x The smaller also passed the test of time while larger dimensions are still questioned as appropriate for inclusion in the genre.^{xi}

Scholars, critics and the artists themselves repeatedly saw increasing size as reactionary to the influence of larger works.^{xii} As miniatures began to be used as decorative objects in addition to functional mementoes, and as they increasingly found themselves competing alongside conventional-sized works in exhibitions, their size grew.^{xiii} The miniaturists, Andrew Robertson, Robert Thorburn and Sir William Charles Ross were all proponents of larger format miniatures as an attempted means to achieve for miniature painting a level of academic respect. They did not wish their work to be seen as trivial trinkets, or faint impressions of real art, and struggled to achieve equal respect by adjusting their works to reflect popular styles. Their cabinet miniature formats allowed for variety in composition and appealed to public demand for miniatures as works of art versus intimate mementoes. The changes wrought by these men upon the genre blurred the lines of distinction between miniatures and conventional works ‘in large’ and departed from what made the miniature ideal and unique.^{xiv} The shift from memento to an object of decorative display also moved the direction away from intimacy towards distance, which further detracted from the miniature’s personal charm.^{xv}

Size did not become rigidly established until the development of the miniature art societies in 1896 when constraints were initially applied solely for the logistics of exhibition display. Initially set at 10 x 12 inches, the Royal Miniature Society quickly dropped down to 5 x 7 inches by 1898. A 1927 exhibition catalogue acknowledges the ambiguity relating to size during the developmental years but stresses the almost exclusive associations with small dimensions pertaining to the term miniature. The catalogue further emphasizes that a miniature should be diminutive enough to be easily held in one hand.^{xvi} The 1960s saw the

general size restraints fall further to 6 x 4 ½ inches where it remains today with this Society. These sizes refer to overall dimensions including the frame. Modern specifications on image size range from 15 to 35 square inches with 24 to 25 square inches being the most prevalent. By establishing clear parameters on size, miniature art societies solidified small dimensions as intrinsic to the widely accepted definition of miniature and requisite to distinguishing a ‘true, traditional or classical’ miniature from competing namesakes in the public arena. Small size creates a charming appeal and invites intimate inspection. This enchanted interactivity between art and viewer hinges upon the diminutive size. Ideal miniatures are distillations of the best in art of conventional size. They surely lose this endearing quality when they grow larger. Perhaps an appropriate quote would be: “The innocence of babyhood is to humanity what miniatures are to art.”^{xvii} We cherish cuddling babies for a variety of reasons and lose this endearment equally for a variety of changes but foremost must be the fact their growing size precludes us from taking them up in our arms.

Small-dimensional size is a fundamental element to defining miniature art. The exact square inch where we cross a line of perception is, and will be, fluid with time but we must acknowledge the line for the confidence and identity it affords us. In a tumultuous ever-changing sea of style, taste and collectability, we cannot forget our foundation of stability. To return to Propert’s analogy - It is time to polish the diamond and not change it to a boulder.

For additional content and resources including information on competing small format artworks and their influence on the issue of size in miniature art, please refer to the text of Modern Masters of Miniature Art in America. In depth discussion on the origins of miniature art and the difficulties of defining it are also covered extensively.

1: Images of the author, Wes Siegrist, courtesy of Rachele Siegrist

ⁱ Barbara Hamley. “Miniature Painting.” *International Congress of Women*. (London: Fisher, 1899), 80.

ⁱⁱ Charles de Kay. “The Miniator’s Art.” *The Cosmopolitan* Vol. 30 No. 4. (New York: Cosmopolitan, 1901), 333.

ⁱⁱⁱ John Mack. *The Art of Small Things*. (London: British Museum, 2007), 186.

^{iv} J. L. Propert. *The History of Miniature Art*. (London, 1887), VI.

^v Wes Siegrist. *Modern Masters of Miniature Art in America*. (Townsend, TN: Siegrist, 2010), 35.

^{vi} Cyril Davenport. *Miniatures Ancient and Modern*. (Chicago: McClurg, 1908), 2-3.

^{vii} Specifically, the etymological discussion of *minium* concluding that size has nothing to do with the term miniature. This thought, compounded by confusion that manuscript illuminations and detached miniatures are the same art form has led some to believe that technique alone is the sole defining factor for ‘miniature’.

^{viii} John Murdoch et al. *The English Miniature*. (London: Yale UP, 1981), 205.

^{ix} *Ibid.*, 54 and 199.

^x *Ibid.*, 205.

^{xi} *Ibid.*, 54.

^{xii} *Ibid.*, 199.

^{xiii} Dale T. Johnson and Carol Aiken. *American Portrait Miniatures in the Manney Collection*. (New York: MET, 1995), 23.

^{xiv} W. M. Rosetti. “The Exhibition of Miniatures at South Kensington.” *The Intellectual Observer* Vol. VIII. (London: Groombridge, 1866), 94.

^{xv} Susan E. Strickler and Marianne E. Gibson. *American Portrait Miniatures: The Worcester Art Museum Collection*. (Worcester: WAM, 1989), 15.

^{xvi} Royal Miniature Painters, Sculptors & Gravers Society. *Exhibition Catalogue*. (London: RMS, 1927), 9.

^{xvii} Francis Trevelyan Miller. *The Connecticut Magazine* Vol. VIII. No. 2. (Hartford: Connecticut Magazine, 1903), 307.