

## SMALLER IS BEAUTIFUL: THE TINY BUT TRIUMPHANT COMEBACK OF ART MINIATURES

Often no bigger than a thumbnail or a matchbox, these little marvels are the subject of a new obsession

Francesca Gavin, *The Financial Times*, 6 February 2021



© Courtesy of The Rachel Uffner Gallery

As a young curator, Hans Ulrich Obrist – now artistic director at the Serpentine Galleries – bought a flip phone and created a museum in his pocket by asking artists to create tiny works for this “exhibition space”. It was intimate, intricate, playful, but also secretive, almost subversive. It is exactly these qualities that are once again giving miniature artworks big appeal among artists, curators and collectors.

Miniatures, of course, have a long, illustrious history, initially growing out of illustrated manuscripts and becoming a luxury item in their own right in the 15th century – painted on vellum and later ivory or porcelain, and encased in jewelled frames. In many ways, says Emma Rutherford, expert on historical miniatures and consultant for Philip Mould Gallery, they echoed a phone screensaver. These portraits were “something you wanted to see every day – your family or your pet or your happy place”. Wealthy supporters of Elizabeth I, for example, would hang her miniature likeness around their necks as a sign of loyalty at court – while tucking those of their lovers in their undergarments.



Franz at Pett Level, 2020, by Sophie Barber © Sophie Barber, courtesy of Alison Jacques Gallery, London

Today the fascination remains, as miniatures redefine ideas around perspective, intimacy and beauty. Contemporary artist Sophie Barber, represented by Alison Jacques Gallery, has gained acclaim for her larger sculptural works, but began making small pieces (from £1,500) for a change of pace. Working in miniature gave her processes a playful element; pieces are made on her kitchen table at home rather than in her studio. Her creations often reference works by early Renaissance artists such as Piero della Francesca and Giotto, but also circus tropes and playing hide-and-seek. “It’s about inflating and deflating art history and places by shrinking them,” she says. “There is something about making these places that feel so big seem so small – and putting them in the palm of your hands. I can actually carry them around in my coat pocket.” Barber’s smallest work is a 1cm x 2cm painting held together by a staple (which is nearly as large as the entire piece).



Franz at Pett Level, 2020, by Sophie Barber © Sophie Barber, courtesy of Alison Jacques Gallery, London

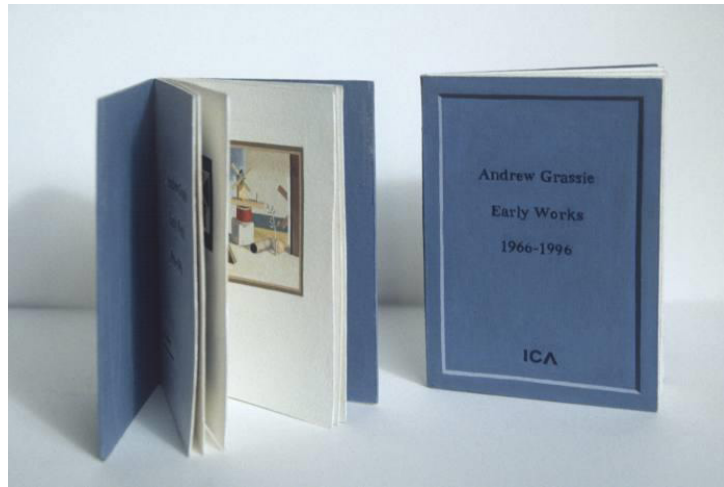


Untitled, c2010, by Henry Taylor © Henry Taylor; photo by Makenzie Goodman; courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth

Trinidadian-Canadian artist Curtis Talwst Santiago began working on a small scale out of necessity. “I had very little money and lived in a tiny bachelor apartment. I would buy old magazines and art books from a man who sold things laid out on a blanket on a street corner. One day that included a black velvet ring box. At home, I peeled off scraps of dried acrylic paint to make a water scene, and carved and painted a miniature figure to resemble my girlfriend. I created a Botticelli’s Venus-inspired diorama of her rising out of the water of Third Beach in Vancouver.”

As Talwst Santiago’s work went viral, people began sending him boxes with accompanying stories for dioramas. “What draws me to this medium is the ability to use almost anything. It’s a game. I often find what I need lying in the streets or the woods.” Traditional materials including oil, acrylic, watercolour, plaster, clay and stone mix with these found objects to create his miniatures (from \$7,000 to \$15,000), a selection of which are on show now until April at The Rooms, St John’s, Newfoundland.

Found objects are also central to the miniature experience at Hauser & Wirth’s spring exhibition by Los Angeles-based artist Henry Taylor. Here, cigarette-, cracker- and matchboxes become canvases. “Their small scale and use of reclaimed, commonplace objects allow Henry to paint with a kind of immediacy that a larger scale and more traditional painterly surface might hinder,” says the gallery’s partner for sales, Cristopher Canizares. “He can capture memories, historical references and passing moments with urgency and directness.” These small pieces are juxtaposed with large-scale sculptures and paintings; the emotive, figurative images of African-American lives are given new perspective in small scale.



Hand-painted catalogue, 2000, by Andrew Grassie © Courtesy of Maureen Paley

Such diminutive pieces invite viewers to “inspect smaller works with a greater degree of scrutiny,” says Scots artist Andrew Grassie, who often works with postcard-sized dimensions but has created pieces as small as 4cm x 6cm. His intricate paintings in egg tempera and pigment often depict behind-the-scenes moments in galleries. They look like photographs, but close study reveals minute brushwork. The intricacy of the details “makes the viewer aware of the act of looking – not just at the works themselves, but through their surface membrane towards what is depicted,” he says. “It amuses me that I’m using a near-redundant medium to translate the instantaneity of a snapshot. It’s like peering into a doll’s house, an intimate and private space.”

Is there more intimate a space than a 3cm x 2cm paint swatch? Such was the canvas for muralist Rachel Spelling who, stuck at home during lockdown last April, was left looking at the same set of walls. A Farrow & Ball paint chart lying around proved new inspiration. “I realised that each chip was like a very small, perfectly prepped wall, just asking for a miniature mural,” she says. Spelling created images of objects, scenarios and portraits on all 132 colours and began to post them on Instagram, with a phenomenal response. (A handpainted full set is £9,500; an open-edition archival print, £150.) At times, her illustrative work echoes Magritte. Tactility is key. “There’s something magical about painting an image that takes your eye to the limit of what it can see, and that fits in the palm of your hand,” she says.

“Rather than constrain the landscape, the miniature actually expands it,” adds British painter Joanna Whittle. “A miniature draws you in, compelling you to look into this described world as if through a looking glass.” Whittle cites her smallest painting as being on a 1.5cm x 1cm costume-jewellery ring, though, like Grassie, she more often works to postcard scale (from £500). “There is something about the postcard – the souvenir that can hold the experience of a place in this little bit of ephemera.” Working from photographic sources, her paintings are made using tiny brushes, magnifying lenses and patience. “I often feel like a Victorian watchmaker,” she notes. Many of her works focus on isolated tents and



temporary architecture: “Places which are hidden from normal view, sheltered behind dark trees and looming skies. There is always a sensation that the viewer has stumbled upon something they shouldn’t be privy to,” she suggests. Her most recent body of small works and postcards focuses on memorials, and will be exhibited at SITE Gallery in Sheffield later this year.



Hollow Tree with Stay, 2020, by Joanna Whittle © Joanna Whittle

Emma Rutherford says that the heightened excitement around miniatures is far from limited to contemporary pieces. One of her and Philip Mould’s recent discoveries – a 57mm portrait of Ethiopian prince Zaga Christ (c1608-1638) by Giovanna Garzoni, an immensely successful female contemporary of Artemisia Gentileschi – sold for more than £150,000. And the market is broadening. One high-profile fan of historic miniatures is Gucci creative director Alessandro Michele, whose Rome apartment features a salon wall of tiny portraits, and who often posts images on Instagram of bracelets encasing miniature portraits and Italian architectural landscapes.

Rutherford, who is on a mission to re-contextualise historical miniatures as equals to their larger-scale contemporaries, believes the explosion of the miniatures secondary-market reflects advances in technology as much as the often secretive narratives around these intimate commissioned objects. “That viewers can now examine brushstrokes in detail online has helped to transform how we look at the small. I’ve got many new buyers who are absolutely obsessed,” she laughs. “Miniatures are part jewels, part portrait, part painting.”