

# Philadelphia Portrait Miniatures 1760 – 1860

by Carol Eaton Soltis



“The painter of miniatures has...the satisfaction of knowing that he exerts his skill in behalf of the best feelings of our nature... {His} work is dependent on...seemingly fragile materials... {yet raise{s}} sensations in the bosoms of those who gaze on them, which may rival any excited by the works of their brethren, that are displayed in gallery and hall”

— William Dunlap<sup>1</sup>

William Dunlap’s comments on miniature painting evoke the values and ideals that made it a prized genre for Philadelphians during the period of profound changes that transformed America from a British colony to a sovereign nation and propelled it through the Civil War. Although Dunlap was writing in 1834 prior to the invention of photography, a competing medium that would impact the prominence, style and production of miniature painting after 1840, the issues he raised remained relevant to Philadelphia miniaturists and their patrons into the 1870s.

Portrait miniatures date from the Renaissance but flourished in the context of the eighteenth-century culture of sentiment and sensibility, in which feeling was considered a

path to knowledge and a mark of humanity and virtue. Portraits in miniature suited the needs of a colonial society, where long separations were commonplace; their size and portability made them easy to stow securely during transit and easy to send abroad.

These fragile, small-scale objects typically crafted in watercolor on ivory, were frequently commissioned to commemorate betrothals, marriages, and separations occasioned by the demands of war, commerce, nation building, and the pursuit of education. Death, signifying the final separation from family and loved ones, generated the mourning miniature, a subgenre of its own. Miniature portraits were also acquired as homage to an admired individual, like George Washington, whose likeness came to embody American

patriotic sentiments and solidarity (Fig.1).

More miniatures were commissioned in Philadelphia than in any other city in the country.<sup>2</sup> Because of its location, Philadelphia had grown into an important trading center during the colonial years of British rule, and after the Revolution was the temporary capital of the new republic. In 1800 it was the largest city in the United States. When the federal government moved to Washington, D.C., the city continued to be the cultural and financial center of the country; home to some of the new nation’s most important families who were eager to find means of consolidating family and group identities. Miniature portraits proved a practical and effective way to establish tradition and testify to established wealth, as well as social and political status.

Over several generations the miniaturists who visited or settled in Philadelphia facilitated this process and found a ready market for their skills.

Chief among miniature painters in Philadelphia during the colonial and Revolutionary periods was Charles Willson Peale (1741–1827), an artist who helped establish the tradition of miniature painting in the city. While training in the studio of Benjamin West (1738–1820) in London between 1767 and 1769, Peale found time to master the latest in British miniature techniques.<sup>3</sup> He learned to prepare the extremely thin pieces of translucent ivory that were just coming into use for miniatures, and explored methods for making pigments adhere successfully. Peale's training included mastering the techniques of stippling (the application of small dots of pigment with the point of a



**PREVIOUS PAGE:**

**Fig. 1:** Robert Field (ca. 1769–1819),  
*George Washington*, after 1796.  
Watercolor on ivory, 3 $\frac{1}{16}$  x 2 $\frac{13}{16}$  inches.  
Courtesy of the Philadelphia Museum of Art;  
gift of Mrs. Daniel J. McCarthy, 1953.

**THIS PAGE, TOP TO BOTTOM:**

**Fig. 2:** Charles Willson Peale (1741–1827),  
*Colonel Henry Beekman Livingston*, ca. 1780.  
Watercolor on ivory, H. 1 $\frac{1}{16}$  inches  
in frame with garnets; reverse: chopped hair  
on ivory disk, forming conjoined hearts.  
Courtesy of a private collection.

**Fig. 2a:** Reverse of image seen in figure 2.

**Fig. 3:** James Peale (1749–1831),  
*Maria Bassett*, 1801.  
Watercolor on ivory, 2 $\frac{3}{4}$  x 2 $\frac{1}{8}$  inches.  
Signed lower right: "JP/1801."  
Courtesy of the Philadelphia Museum of Art;  
gift of Jane Barbour Charles, 1980.

**Fig. 4:** James Peale (1749–1831),  
*George Washington*, 1788.  
Watercolor on ivory, 1 $\frac{3}{4}$  x 1 $\frac{1}{2}$  inches.  
Signed, l.r.: "JP/1788." Mounted in  
engraved gold case after 1843.  
Courtesy of The Dietrich American Foundation.





**Fig. 5:** Pierre Henri (ca. 1760–1822), *The Artist's Family*, ca. 1800. Watercolor on ivory, 2¾ x 3⅜ inches. Courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art; purchase, Martha J. Fleischman Gift, in memory of Keren-Or Bernbaum. Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

brush) and hatching (the application of long, parallel brushstrokes). Undoubtedly, he returned home with a supply of small, full-bodied but sharply pointed brushes, called “pencils,” made from sable or camel’s hair, the miniaturist’s primary tool.<sup>4</sup> On his return to Annapolis in 1769 and continuing through his move to Philadelphia late in 1775, Peale established a network of patrons eager to purchase his work. These ranged from Quakers with simple tastes to individuals who preferred the elegant and expensive.

During the Revolution, Peale was posted to Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, where he met many of the patriots whose likenesses he would commemorate in miniature. At the end of the war he wrote to West, “...I have not wanted employment, but have done more in miniature than in any other manner, because these are more portable and therefore

could be kept out of the way of the plundering Enemy.”<sup>5</sup> Peale’s miniature of Colonel Henry Beekman Livingston (1750–1831) was painted to celebrate the colonel’s marriage to Anne Hume Shippen in Philadelphia on March 11, 1781 (Fig. 2). Livingston makes direct eye contact with the viewer. His handsome uniform documents the attire of the New York regiment that he raised and which saw considerable action. Peale’s portrait is a romantic memento and an object in which national and private histories are conjoined. The miniature’s reverse (Fig. 2a) shows finely executed hair work of intertwined hearts, which joined the bride and groom iconographically and physically. The use of the hair of the giver, or of both the giver and the recipient, infused the object with a talismanic quality. It is unknown who crafted the jeweled frame, but during the war, when there

were no imports from overseas, Peale turned to Philadelphia jewelers for assistance and also learned to make his own glass and fit his miniatures into bracelets or lockets.

Peale imparted his realistic style to his brother, James (1749–1831), whom he trained, and to whom, starting in 1786, he referred his miniature commissions. Adept and enthusiastic, James developed a fine technique and a distinctive style. A charming portrait of Maria Bassett (Fig. 3) exhibits the lighter, livelier palette and the decoratively elegant sense of line he developed in his mature work. Maria proudly displays the portrait of her late father, Colonel Burwell Bassett, a close friend and relative of George Washington.

Both Peales knew Washington personally and painted him before and after he became president. Charles, first painted him in miniature in July 1776 for Martha Washington, and James completed a remarkable “up close” likeness in 1788 that he kept as a private memento (Fig. 4).<sup>6</sup>

When Washington became president, the demand for his likeness grew with astounding rapidity. The most sought after presidential likenesses were those painted by Gilbert Stuart (1775–1828) in Philadelphia in the mid-1790s. To those who wanted copies of his portraits in miniature, Stuart recommended Robert Field (ca. 1769–1819), who had trained at London’s Royal Academy and was among the most respected British miniaturists in America (fig. 1). Like Stuart, he remained in Philadelphia until the federal government relocated to Washington, D.C. in 1800. For Field, as for several other miniaturists, connection with an established portraitist was a great benefit. During his Philadelphia years, he not only did a brisk business in Washington miniatures, he also painted many of the city’s prominent citizens and visitors.

From the mid 1790s European artists

arrived in Philadelphia eager to capitalize on the popularity of Washington and the growing market for art and luxury goods. They ranged from such sophisticated practitioners of the elegant miniature as Jean-Pierre-Henri Elouis (active 1755–1840), who trained in Paris and at London's Royal Academy, to Pierre Henri (ca.1760–1822), whose naïve style also found a market. Henri's family portrait, with his own portrait shown at his wife's breast (Fig. 5), is reminiscent of work produced by many American-born artists, now obscure, whose less technically sophisticated works also satisfied the appetite for miniature portraits during this period.

Philadelphia was among the several cities where the romantic and sensitive portraits of Edward Greene Malbone (1777–1807) were influential. Despite his death at age twenty-nine, he is typically considered the finest American miniaturist active at the peak of the genre's popularity. His mature works take full advantage of the translucency of the ivory and exhibit a delicate technique in which fine interwoven lines create form. His portrait of General Anne-Louis de Tousard (1749–1817) achieves great presence despite its small size (Fig. 6). Tousard's soft grey-blue eyes meet the viewer's and the red collar and lapels of his uniform create a dynamic background for his military medals, of the Order of St. Louis and Order of the Cincinnati. At the request of Washington, Tousard, a French officer on the staff of La Fayette, authored *The American Artillerist's Companion*, published in Philadelphia in eight volumes between 1809 and 1813. Malbone's miniature of Tousard was engraved by David Edwin for its frontispiece.

By the second decade of the nineteenth century miniaturists were increasingly displaying their work in exhibitions and commercial galleries. This publicized their skills but also revealed a willingness on the part of many owners to show off the fine and expensive luxury items they had commissioned. Benjamin Trott (1770–1843) enjoyed great popularity during his years in

Philadelphia, which extended through approximately 1820. He benefitted from his association with Gilbert Stuart, and later, with the Philadelphia portraitist Thomas Sully (1783–1872). In both cases, Trott replicated their portraits or satisfied their patrons' requests for portraits in miniature. Not surprisingly, Trott's early Philadelphia miniatures exhibit affinities with the portraits of Stuart, while his later Philadelphia pieces echo the style of Thomas Sully. Trott's portrait of the young merchant Benjamin Kintzing (Fig. 7) is an excellent example of his deft brushwork and the lightly tinted washes of color often seen in his portraits of youthful sitters. His miniature of Rebecca Biddle Chapman, the wife of the eminent Dr. Nathaniel Chapman, exemplifies the qualities of stylish glamour

and assured presence that made Trott a favorite among Philadelphia's elite (Fig. 8). Miniaturist Daniel Dickinson (1795–1877), the younger brother of the New England miniaturist Anson Dickinson (1779–1852), was also allied with Thomas Sully. Exhibitions of his miniatures at the Pennsylvania Academy between 1824 and 1845 included multiple portraits framed in groupings of as many as six images, as well as imaginative compositions.

Trained by her father, James Peale, Anna Claypoole Peale (1791–1878) dedicated herself solely to miniature painting, and had a highly successful career, painting strong characterizations of famous men such as Andrew Jackson. Her exhibition record at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts



**LEFT:**  
Fig. 6: Edward Greene Malbone (1777–1807), General Anne-Louis de Tousard, ca. 1804. Watercolor on ivory, 3 $\frac{3}{8}$  x 2 $\frac{3}{4}$  inches. Courtesy of the Philadelphia Museum of Art; gift of Mrs. Daniel McCarthy, 1954.



**RIGHT:**  
Fig. 7: Benjamin Trott (ca. 1770–1843), Benjamin Harbeson Kintzing, ca. 1815. Watercolor on ivory, 2 $\frac{1}{16}$  x 2 $\frac{15}{16}$  inches. Gold locket frame with pearl-studded wire trim. Courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art; bequest of Mary E. Kintzing, 1956. Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art.



extended virtually unbroken from 1817 to 1842. Like other miniaturists painting in the 1820s and 1830s, she increasingly used square or rectangular formats as opposed to the more traditional oval shape. Her handsome portrait of the editor, historian, and Harvard president Jared Sparks (1789–1866) illustrates her finely crafted work (Fig. 9). Painting into the 1840s, her vivid portraits with their glossy surfaces competed well against photographs.<sup>7</sup>

Realistic, inexpensive, and easily produced in multiples, the daguerreotype, introduced to the public in 1839, was to ultimately become the most desirable way to commemorate a likeness. However, Philadelphian, John Henry Brown (1818–1891) was a miniaturist who cleverly adapted to the aesthetic and technological changes wrought by photography. Not only did he use the photograph to craft highly realistic likenesses on ivory, he also experimented with the hybrid medium of the opalotype, an albumen photographic

image transferred onto opaque white glass. Less labor intensive and needing less artistic intervention, it was relatively inexpensive and could be displayed like a traditional miniature. However, for those who could afford them, Brown's traditional richly colored, strongly modeled and more nuanced miniatures were clearly preferable (Fig. 10).

The lure of the traditional miniature portrait persists today: as handheld artifacts of personal and national history, and as small-scale, minutely detailed objects of art. @

This article showcases a portion of the miniatures that will be on display in *Patriots and Presidents: Philadelphia Portrait Miniatures, 1760–1860*, the loan exhibit at The Philadelphia Antiques Show, which runs from April 18–21, 2009 at The Navy Yard, 5100 South Broad Street in Philadelphia. For information visit [www.philaantiques.com](http://www.philaantiques.com) or call 215.387.3500.

**Carol E. Soltis** is consulting curator to The Center for American Art at The Philadelphia Museum of Art.

1. William Dunlap, *A History of the Rise and Progress of the Arts of Design in the United States* (1834; reprint, New York, Dover Publications, 1969), 401.
2. Anne Verplanck, "Facing Philadelphia: the Social Functions of Silhouettes, Miniatures, and Daguerreotypes," 1760–1860 (Ph.D. diss., College of William and Mary, 1996), 23, note 1.
3. Robin Jaffe Frank, *Love and Loss, American Portrait and Mourning Miniatures* (New Haven & London, Yale University Press, 2000), 52.
4. Carol Aiken, "Materials and Techniques of the American Portrait Miniaturist," in Dale T. Johnson, ed., *American Portrait Miniatures in the Manney Collection* (New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1990), 27–37.
5. Charles Willson Peale to Benjamin West, Philadelphia, April 9, 1783, *The Selected Papers of Charles Willson Peale and his Family*, v.1, ed. Lillian B. Miller, et al. (New Haven & London, Yale University Press) 387–8.
6. The miniature was purchased by the Philadelphia artillery corps of the Washington Grays from the heirs of James Peale.
7. Anna's works are variously signed Anna Claypoole Peale or Mrs. Staughton. In 1829 she married Rev. William Staughton but he died within three months. After her marriage to Brigadier General William Duncan in 1842, she retired. See, Anne Sue Hirshorn, "Legacy of Ivory: Anna Claypoole Peale's Portrait Miniatures," *Bulletin of the Detroit Institute of Arts*, v. 4 (1989): 17–27.



**ABOVE:**  
**Fig. 8:** Benjamin Trott (ca. 1770–1843),  
*Rebecca Biddle, Mrs. Nathaniel Chapman*, ca. 1815.  
Watercolor on ivory, 3<sup>3</sup>/<sub>16</sub> x 2<sup>5</sup>/<sub>16</sub> inches.  
Courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art; Fletcher Fund.  
Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

**BELOW:**  
**Fig. 9:** Anna Claypoole Peale (1791–1878),  
*Jared Sparks*, 1827.  
Watercolor on ivory, 2<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 2<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches.  
Inscribed I.I.: "Anna C. Peale 1827."  
Courtesy of the Philadelphia Museum of Art;  
gift of Robert L. McNeil Jr., 2008.



**ABOVE:**  
**Fig. 10:** John Henry Brown (1818–1891),  
*Self-Portrait*, ca. 1846.  
Watercolor on ivory, 2<sup>7</sup>/<sub>16</sub> inches high.  
Courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art;  
Maria Dewitt Jessup Fund.  
Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art.