

PRESS RELEASE

Portrait miniatures from 1590 to 1890

As the name suggests, portrait miniatures are hand-painted likenesses of the smallest and very smallest size with heights ranging from less than a centimetre to around fifteen to twenty centimetres and occasionally even larger.

From the middle of the 16th century to the time of the discovery and spread of photography in the mid-19th century, they fulfilled the task of providing the most life-like facsimile of a loved one that could be worn, or furnishing an impression of the appearance of a person that one did not know, but with whom one was to become acquainted (if the countenance in the picture rendered this prospect appealing). Therefore, well into the 19th century and long before the arrival of Internet dating, in what were generally arranged marriages prior to which the bride and groom had frequently never met, the exchange of portrait miniatures was the only possibility to assess the extent to which the couple found one another attractive.

During the separation of people sharing a close relationship, above all pairs and family members, portrait miniatures served as a stand-in for the absent person rather like the wallet photo continues to do today. Therefore, miniatures played a significant role in times of crisis and warfare.

Accordingly, it is striking that the Liaunig collection of miniatures contains an especially large number of likenesses from the politically turbulent times of the English Civil War and Oliver Cromwell in the mid-17th century, as well as numerous portraits from the years of the French revolution and the subsequent Napoleonic wars between 1790 and 1815.

Europe's rulers also liked to distribute valuable (advertising) gifts, frequently in the form of orders encrusted with diamonds or precious gold snuffboxes, which were decorated with a tiny portrait of the potentate. Naturally enough, the recipients quickly turned the gold and gems into cash at the nearest jewellers, but nonetheless retained the miniature, which although materially worthless, was a souvenir.

Royal countenances are well represented in the Liaunig collection, not only through portraits of the Habsburgs, Empress Maria Theresia, her husband and daughters Maria Anna and Marie-Antoinette, as well as Empress Elizabeth, but also their political opponents such as King Friedrich II of Prussia and Emperor Napoleon of France. Many of the French Bourbons are also present with numerous miniscule portrayals of Louis XV and his successors, right up to the last French king, Louis-Philippe from the House of Bourbon-Orleans.

While the ordinary soldier who went off to war was generally unable to afford an expensive, first class portraitist to paint his picture for presentation to his loved one(s) as a final likeness, the ruling classes and the bourgeoisie had the financial means to be able to pose for the best painters of their time.

For example, Jean-Baptiste Isabey (1767-1855) was not only a star in his French homeland. He worked initially as a court painter for Emperor Napoleon, but thanks to his flattering brushstrokes also remained popular with the emperor's political foes and successors. He travelled to the Congress of Vienna and painted every one of rank and reputation. His portrait of the grand-duchess Maria Pawlowna, the sister of Emperor Alexander I, which was painted in Vienna in 1815 and is part of the Liaunig collection, can currently be admired in the Vienna Congress exhibition in the Belvedere Museum in Vienna, where it is on loan until the end of June. However, Isabey's likeness of Emperor Napoleon painted five years earlier in Paris is on display at the Museum Liaunig.

The leading miniature painter of the Viennese Biedermeier period was undoubtedly Moritz Michael Daffinger (1790–1849) and his most famous self-portrait is one of the treasures of the Liaunig collection. Until 1921 this picture was in the possession of the Daffinger family's antecedents and then in the collection of the infamous financier Camillo Castiglioni (1879–1957). This Daffinger "selfie" is familiar to all Austrians of the pre-euro generation, as a copperplate engraving of the miniature served as the basis for the design of the last 20-schilling banknote.

Of the almost 300 miniatures in the Liaunig collection (tendency upward), a representative selection of 100 items painted in Europe between 1590 and 1900 is shown in this exhibition and these are documented scientifically in a catalogue with over 400 pages. In three years at the latest, another 100 portraits from the collection will replace the current choices. This is partly due to the fact that miniatures are painted largely using light-sensitive watercolours and therefore are only displayed publically at a handful of museums. Interested persons are generally only permitted to see individual pieces upon request in the study rooms, as is the case in the Louvre and the Albertina in Vienna. Therefore, the Museum Liaunig is one of the few institutions in the world and the only one in Austria, in which such large numbers of significant miniatures are accessible to the public. An achievement made possible by the very latest museum technology.

Dr. Bodo Hofstetter
(Exhibition curator)

Exhibition "Portrait miniatures from 1590 to 1890"

May 1 to October 30, 2016 · Museum Liaunig · 9155 Neuhaus/Suha 41 · Austria

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Wednesday to Sunday from 10 am to 6 pm · guided tours at 11 am and 2 pm

PRESS PHOTOS



Nicholas Hilliard (1547-1618/1619)
Woman in brocade dress
London, um 1585/1595

Samuel Cooper (1608/1609-1672)
Young woman, Mrs Graham
London, ca. 1645/1650

Charles Boit (1662-1727)
Double portrait: Sir Thomas Cookes and Lady Mary Cookes
England, 1689

André Rouquet (1701-1758)
Young woman
London, ca. 1730/1740

Pierre Pasquier (1731-1806)
Marie-Antoinette
Paris, 1771

John Smart (1741-1811)
Commander
Madras, 1789

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