When Miniatures and Photography Collide

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During the nineteenth century, a new process for portraiture arose in the form of photography. The painted miniature was not prepared for this radical technology that could capture a person’s exact likeness, and soon artists began to adapt their miniatures in an effort to compete against the new medium. Surprisingly, though, photographic and miniature portraits managed to coexist throughout the century. In this paper, I will examine the two media’s origin, their relationship with one another, and the influences that they had on each other in nineteenth-century America.

It has always been important for humans to create and own pictures of beautiful things, and what better subject is there to look upon than the human face? Some part of our being finds fascinating the renderings of our own species. We experience nostalgia and vanity alike in portraiture. In the early 1800s, people could only rely on paintings for representations of the human likeness, and this was more than enough. A painting can be interpreted, idealized, and altered in ways that reality can’t. In the nineteenth century, the miniature was a popular form of portraiture in America. Portrait miniatures were used as portable keepsakes of family members and loved ones. These were more practical, and cheaper, than full-scale portraits. However, with the invention of photography, miniatures began to face serious competition. Photography quickly became recognized as an easy and inexpensive way for people to get their portraits done, and this presented challenges to painters. It was a medium that was available to the masses, compared to the rather aristocratic tradition of painting. Photos created a perfect likeness of the sitter, while painted portraits could only come realistically close. Combine that perfect likeness with photography’s quick process and cheap price, and photography threatened to run painters out of business. Miniaturists held their ground, though, and sought to compete with photography. To present-day audiences it may seem like the two media had a contentious relationship throughout the whole century, but it wasn’t long before photographers and miniaturists discovered that they weren’t so different after all and that each process could benefit the other.

Miniatures—What’s in a Name?

Miniatures’ origin begins as early as the fifteenth century. At that time, artists were producing illuminated manuscripts that contained small-scale paintings. These paintings were called limnings, and were later referred to in the seventeenth century as miniatures. In later years, people mistook the term miniature to mean small, although the word comes from the Latin minium, meaning vermillion, the red pigment used in illuminated manuscripts. By the nineteenth century, miniature described anything that was small in size. Of course, the word was still used to signify portrait miniatures, which, by that time, were becoming extremely popular in America.

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In earlier times, miniature making required plenty of preparation even before the actual painting process. Miniaturists ground their pigments into a fine powder. Then they added the powder to a binder, usually gum arabic. During the nineteenth century, however, artists found it more convenient to purchase ready-made paint. The paint was applied to a base with a brush that consisted of only a few hairs. It is important to note that miniatures are not painted in the same way that a normal-sized painting is. Artists applied the paint to their surface with tiny movements. Close-ups of miniatures reveal the dotting, lining, and cross-hatching that make up the image (Fig. 1).

Early miniaturists painted on vellum, or calfskin, in true illuminated manuscript fashion. In the nineteenth century ivory was used most often, though this material was more costly. After the invention of the considerably cheaper photograph, miniaturists altered their techniques. Daphne Foskett, the author of a comprehensive guide to miniatures, points out,

By the time vellum was no longer used, paper was available for the artists who did not wish to use ivory, and this was of course much cheaper. Card was another suitable alternative. When photography was invented in the middle of the nineteenth century a few artists used a thin photographic base on the ivory and painted over it. For those who could not easily catch a likeness this was a cheap way of producing a portrait, but it is not a truly acceptable method and the experienced eye can usually detect miniatures painted in this way. They are not fakes, but lack the finesse of the artist’s skill in producing a likeness from life.²

Miniaturists could not compete with photography’s quick process, and they certainly could not compete with its ability to produce an exact likeness. Rather than trying to rival the photograph’s accuracy, they adopted the technique in an attempt market to a society in which the new technology was rapidly becoming popular.

A New “Art” Form
In 1839, photography was introduced to the public. It immediately faced skepticism as to whether or not it was a form of art. This topic was highly contested because of the scientific and

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mechanical nature of the photographic process. Throughout the nineteenth century, photographers worked to prove their value as artists.

Two types of photography were prevalent during this time period. Other forms existed, but the daguerreotype and the albumen print were the most prevalent in the early years of the medium. The first type, the daguerreotype, was named after its inventor Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre. It was “a unique, unduplicatable, laterally reversed monochrome picture on a metal plate.” That daguerreotypes were one-of-a-kind gave them some artistic merit. The other type of photography that appeared in this period is the albumen print, which was produced about a decade after the daguerreotype. These photos were developed on paper from a negative, making each photo reproducible. This added to already ongoing debates about the photo as art. The negative was the tonally and laterally reversed image. It was then placed on a sheet treated with chemicals and exposed to the light, revealing a tonally and laterally correct image. A unique binding agent of egg whites was used in the development process, thus the name “albumen prints.”

Photography blew “lifelike” painted portraiture out of the water. It was a perfect likeness. Miniaturists felt dismay because they could not feel that they could compete. Painting, however, did have a particular advantage over photography, and that was that it was a representation. The quality of painting that caused people to reject it in favor of photography in fact led some people back to that interpretive medium. Jan von Brevern proposes that the photographed portraits were not only perfect likenesses but “disgusting likenesses” as well. While many people reveled in the photograph’s ability to portray them perfectly, some were appalled at its shocking realism. They felt that it was “an over-referent detail that, while representing every hair, every pore, and every wrinkle in a person’s face, failed completely to represent the person.” Limners had the ability to represent a person’s appearance but could go one step further and embellish it. Paintings could idealize subjects, but photographs revealed each and every detail, good or bad, of a person’s face. In this case, the “perfect likeness” of the photograph was a detriment. However, not everyone was on board with the photograph’s ability to take a likeness. An 1860 magazine article explains,

…the principal defect of photographic portraiture [is] the inability to choose the most characteristic and agreeable expression; and this becomes painfully evident from the impossibility most people feel of commanding a natural expression when posed in the photographer’s chair, and in momentary consciousness of being caught alive in that mysterious camera.

Miniaturists have the power to choose what their subject looks like. Evidently, some Americans still found that aspect of painting appealing. This argues that a photograph doesn’t even capture a true image of a person because they are posing for a camera, not taking into account the fact that one must pose for a miniature, too. In this antagonistic environment, how can these two media coexist? As it turns out, miniatures and photography share common themes.

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Expressions of Grief
*Mourning Portraiture*

The mortality rate was high in early America, and the death of loved ones was something that people dealt with on a regular basis. After the eighteenth century brought the importance of familial relationships and child rearing to the forefront of society, the presence of grieving over death became prevalent. The family was more intimate than ever, and loss created an even more devastating blow to its members. In this environment, mourning miniatures flourished. These miniatures were typically worn on the body as jewelry and acted as a constant and comforting reminder that the deceased was always present. Additionally, mourning miniatures were often monochromatic, done in black and white or sepia. This presents a sense of hopelessness. The lack of color reflects the feelings of those wearing the miniatures. With the death of a loved one, the world turns gray and color disappears.

This mourning locket, attributed to Samuel Folwell, represents the standard mourning jewelry (Fig. 2). It has a simple, monochromatic color scheme and is drawn in an illustrative, stylized manner. The locket demonstrates some common mourning jewelry motifs. The tree, which forms a sort of frame over the top part of the painting, is a weeping willow, an appropriate depiction of grief in nature. The weeping willow is also able to regrow after it has been cut, signifying a life after death mentality.6 The urn and the pedestal recall Classical imagery, which denotes civilization, propriety, and Christian principles. The pedestal reads, “Rest in Peace” and has the deceased person’s monogram beneath it. These lockets often had similar sentiments of well-wishing for the dead. The shape of the locket itself has symbolism. The circle or oval shape

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represents the circle of life and the eternity of the mourner’s love for the deceased. The female mourner was also a popular symbol in mourning miniatures. She did not represent a particular person, but an ideal. In a sense, the female mourner represented the Allegory of Grief. Here, the woman is dressed in black, which present day viewers will recognize as the appropriate color for mourning. It is interesting to note, however, that most female mourners in these paintings were dressed in white instead of black (Fig. 3). The white clothing reflects the important Classical imagery mentioned above. Dressed in white, the figures look like the marble statues of antiquity. The color white also implies pureness and spirituality, important characteristics for women to uphold. Robin Jaffee Frank explains that the female mourner “reflects the role of women as the symbolic embodiments of moral virtue, the keepers of the domestic sphere. As Americans began to move away from the emotionally restrained, father-dominated family of early America, the tender

mother emerged as the moral guardian in sermons, child-rearing manuals, prescriptive literature—and art.” 7 Although grief over death was something that was becoming common at this time in America, it is clear that mourning still seemed to be a woman’s task. After all, the portraits were inscribed on pieces of jewelry, which were usually worn by women. Male figures rarely appeared in these types of mourning miniatures.

When photography was unveiled in 1839, it also became a medium for commemorating deceased loved ones. There are obvious similarities between mourning miniatures and mourning photography. First, the natural colorless sepia tone of photographs matches the monochromatic color scheme in the miniatures. Of course, all photography at that time was in black and white, but its lack of color helped to express what the miniatures tried to express: the colorlessness of life in the face of death. In L. F. Cramer’s photograph, a young woman poses with a portrait of a deceased female relative (Fig. 4). Photography also preferred the female mourner, it seems. She wears the traditional white dress that symbolizes spirituality. The woman lifts up a cloth to reveal

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7 Frank, 123-124.
a portrait of a dead loved one. It is also possible that the woman is pulling the cloth down over
the portrait, representing closure. The fact that the portrait is still visible, though, signifies that
the deceased’s memory will last. It is clear that the photo is meant to glorify the dead woman.
Viewers are immediately drawn to her portrait because of the sense of mystery that the cloth
conveys. The woman in white keeps her face devoid of expression, which helps to divert
attention away from her as well as to show her grief. Geoffrey Batchen describes this photo as
“[enabling] life and death to stand side by side before the camera.”8 The painted miniature could
not do this, but photography excelled at it because of its ability to capture an exact likeness of
real life (and death).

Post-Mortem Portraiture
The photograph’s accurate capture of life and death is especially evident in post-mortem
photography. It was common practice for Victorian families to commission photographs of their
deceased loved ones. Since cameras were not yet completely portable, families had to bring the
dead person into the studio to have his or her portrait made. Today, audiences may view this as a
peculiar if not disturbing custom, but at the time it was not unusual at all. More often than not,
the deceased appeared to be sleeping, as is the case in Figure 5. This daguerreotype shows a
young mother holding her dead child. At first glance, it does not seem to be a scene of grief. The
child looks like he is asleep, and the mother is watching him serenely. The mother’s black
mourning dress and the child’s stiff, mannequin-like body are the only clues to the mournful
meaning behind this photo. The mother wears black, a color that was becoming conventional for
mourning instead of the white of the early nineteenth century. She is looking down, with only
half her face showing, taking the emphasis off her. We follow her gaze down to the child, who
stands out because he is dressed in white. The white dress represents innocence and purity. Its
preservation in a case reveals its importance as a memento. This photo is an excellent depiction
of the life with death concept, as mentioned above.

Fig. 4. L. F. Cramer, *Portrait of a woman in a white dress unveiling a framed photograph*, ca. 1880s. Albumen print.

Miniaturists also participated in post-mortem portraiture, an example being P.R. Vallée’s Harriet Mackie (Fig. 6). This miniature, contained in a locket, shows a young, deceased woman in her wedding clothes. She also seems to be sleeping. It was common during that period to show death as a peaceful sleep. Miss Mackie is dressed in the typical white clothes and looks angelic with her crown of flowers. However, there is something unnatural about the painting. The skin is not ideally pale but deathly white, and the subject looks as if she is posed. Just like photographers, miniaturists used frames and other devices to hold the body in the desired position. The process of post-mortem portraiture was certainly an unpleasant one for both photographers and miniaturists, but miniaturists had a far more uncomfortable experience. Concerning the portrait of Harriet Mackie, Frank points out that “[the artist] may have secured Harriet’s slack jaw with a strap and continued to work as decomposition set in.”9 Photographers could take a picture in a couple of minutes, but miniaturists had to sit with the corpse for hours. It is for this reason that photography was widely the preferred medium for post-mortem portraits: “Daguerreotypy facilitated painters who shuddered at taking a portrait from the corpse, and increasingly the camera shutter replaced the painter's brush.”10 The painted portrait still existed as a special tribute to the deceased, but the subjects of those paintings were taken from previous portraits when the subject was still alive.

Fig. 5. Unknown, Mother Holding Dead Child: Child in Coffin, ca. 1845-1855. Daguerreotype, 2 ¾ x 3 ¾ in.

Fig. 6. P.R. Vallée, Harriet Mackie (The Dead Bride), 1804. Watercolor and graphite on ivory, 2 7/16 x 1 15/16 in.

9 Frank, 141.
Celebrity Portraits
Americans have loved their celebrities from the beginning. Images of the famous were usually copies or duplicates of an original and were often mass-produced to distribute to adoring fans throughout the country. Presidents were the closest things that Americans had to national heroes, so naturally they were popular subjects in portraiture. Anna Claypoole Peale, niece of the famous American artist Charles Willson Peale, created such a portrait (Fig. 7). Her miniature of Andrew Jackson portrays the president as a general. Indeed, Jackson had recently led America to victory in the War of 1812.11 Usually, miniature portraits were placed on a solid background, but here Peale has painted clouds. The clouds and Jackson’s wind-swept hair make it look like he is outside, perhaps on the battlefield. The president has been idealized for the most part, except for the wrinkles around his eyes. The portrait was not mass-produced, but it was admired by many Americans at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts.

Americans did not like to portray their national heroes in any grandiose manner. While European artists tended to elevate their famous sitters to a level that was much higher than their actual fame, American artists preferred to capture a more humble subject. Alexander Gardner’s portrait of Abraham Lincoln is truly an antithesis to European grandiosity (Fig. 8). It is clear that Lincoln is in a photo studio because there isn’t much of a scene. The backdrop is plain, and there is only one piece of furniture. He stares at the camera, but he isn’t really looking at it. Rather, he is lost in his thoughts, deep in contemplation. In 1863, when the photograph was made, the Civil War was in full swing. Gardner succeeds in capturing both Lincoln’s exhaustion of the war and his responsiveness to it. Additionally, Lincoln is seated instead of standing. This makes him appear as though he is at eye level with the viewer, which makes him more relatable and less imposing.

Fig. 7. Anna Claypoole Peale, Andrew Jackson, 1819. Watercolor on ivory, 3 1/8 x 2 7/16 in.

Synthesis
By now, it is clear that miniatures can do things that photos can’t, and photos can do things that miniatures can’t. Throughout the century, these two art forms had what looks to be an ongoing rivalry. But maybe the rivalry wasn’t as “ongoing” as it seems. It didn’t take long after the invention of photography for the two media to realize that each could benefit the other. For example, photographs during the nineteenth century were colorless. Some Americans found the grey color of human skin to be off-putting and resembling death. To remedy this, photographers turned to painting. They tinted the skin with paint and, while they were at it, added additional details in color (Fig. 9).

Fig. 8. Alexander Gardner, Abraham Lincoln, 1863. Albumen print.

Fig. 9. Unknown, Boy and Girl in Blue Tunics, ca. 1850. Hand-tinted daguerreotype.
Photographers could apply ready-made paint to the photo or they could adhere dry pigment to it with a binder. Miniaturists, in turn, used photos. As aforementioned by Foskett, some miniaturists used a photo as the basis for their portrait. They painted over it in order to create an extremely accurate image. The Cosmopolitan Art Journal attests to this claim: “Many an inferior miniature-painter who understood the mixing and applying of pleasing tints was wholly unskilled in the true drawing of the human head. With this deficiency supplied, their present productions, therefore, are far superior to anything they accomplished, single-handed, before.”12 Many people argue that the photograph was putting painters out of business. These miniaturists are actually becoming more successful because of the invention of the photograph. There is no reason why we can say that one art form was better than the other. Both clearly share equal importance.

Conclusion
In nineteenth-century America, miniature paintings and photography held what looked like competing roles against each other. Would photography take the place of miniatures? Is photography really art? How will miniatures adjust? In the end, these questions didn’t really matter. Miniaturists and photographers shared ideas, techniques, and subjects. Americans got their coveted portraits, photography got its status as an art form, and miniature painting remained a respectable practice.

Bibliography


