

**Portrait Miniatures in the
Royal Ontario Museum**

H. Hickl-Szabo

Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, 1981.
60 pp., 50 ill., \$6.50

The recent surge of interest in the portrait miniature is undoubtedly due in part to economics; the miniature has the advantage of being both an original work of art and an antique, but is small enough to be portable in our mobile modern world. For this reason, it is usually listed as one of the more "sure investments" in a column such as that of Robin Duthy in *Connoisseur* (v. 207: 832, pp. 125-26). This pragmatic interest, however, has fostered a growth of scholarship and publication dealing with portrait miniatures from the point of view of art history. In the last two years, more than twenty-five books, catalogues or periodical articles have appeared regarding miniatures, from the broadest type of introduction to a scholarly history and descriptive analysis of one particular portrait. It is clear that Hickl-Szabo is right in stating that "the portrait miniature is very much in demand as a collector's item" (*Portrait Miniatures in the Royal Ontario Museum*, 1981, p. 1).

Until recently Harper's brief history of silhouettes and miniatures (Chapter 10 in his *Painting in Canada: A History*) was the only published survey of the portrait miniature in this country. Various articles and even books had been written about some miniaturists, but the majority of these were either books published before World War II dealing with an artist who also did miniatures, or were newspaper articles dealing with a hometown miniaturist. Interest in Canada, however, has followed the general trend with the result that several articles and two monographs have appeared within the last few months. Rosenfeld's thesis, for Concordia Univ., the appendix of which appeared in the *Journal of Canadian Art History* (v. 2, pp. 111-21), was the first done in Canada dealing specifically with miniatures (Betcherman's 1962 thesis on Berczy, while it included his miniatures, dealt with his entire career).

Undoubtedly, the Royal Ontario Museum's collection of miniatures is one of the largest in the country,

although there are other smaller collections as well as scattered portraits in large art collections in many museums and galleries. The Houses of Parliament, for instance, contain the set of Fathers of Confederation painted by Juliette de Lavoye and commissioned by Samuel Bronfman in honour of Canada's centennial. Seagram's 1967 annual report included a supplemental six-page folder that was basically a catalogue of this set. The museum at the Halifax Citadel has a display of twelve miniatures by Laura M. D. Mitchell, who was born in Halifax in 1883, although her work as a miniaturist was done largely in the United States.

This particular catalogue is the first to be published in Canada dealing with a miniature collection (aside from the Seagram folder mentioned above). The basic style follows that of several recent examples such as the New Orleans Museum of Art's catalogue of the Latter-Schlesinger Collection or Reynolds' new edition of the catalogue of miniatures of the Wallace Collection in London. The arrangement is generally chronological moving from the probable 1530's to the 1830's, often with unfortunate gaps. Each of the fifty miniatures is illustrated (six in colour). The subject, artist and date are given (where these are known), medium and size listed, and then a brief description follows, giving details on the subject, the artist, or both. On occasion, a short provenance is also given. There are no works by Canadian miniaturists and no portraits of figures notable in Canadian history. Infrequently, though, a Canadian connection does appear; plate 35, for instance, illustrates a miniature by Denis Brownell Murphy, father of the renowned Anna Jameson (although this fact is not mentioned in the plate description). A second catalogue is evidently planned and this perhaps may contain miniatures of Canadian significance. While there is a short bibliography on the last page, there is no index by artist, sitter or even country. This is an unfortunate omission as some artists are represented more than once, several pages apart, depending on when the particular miniature being described was painted.

As is stated in the introduction, the catalogue itself is not intended as a

scholarly publication but as an enjoyable introduction to miniatures in general, and specifically to the Royal Ontario Museum's collection. In this objective, it succeeds. Nevertheless, there are statements made in the introduction which are somewhat misleading, even for a popular publication. The first of these, that "the portrait miniature (though still not entirely neglected) is today a medium that appeals to perhaps fewer than forty artists in Europe and the Americas." In fact, modern miniatures, too, are enjoying something of a revival. The 1975 exhibit of the Society of Miniaturists in London featured works by forty-five artists and only last year, Rae Harris, a member of the Royal Society of Miniature Painters, Sculptors and Gravers, published a manual on painting miniatures, in her home town of Perth, Australia, through her local university press. A further statement reads "...miniatures have largely been the work of Englishmen, with some influence from France." While it is true that the English (both men and women) dominate this field certainly there are extensive bodies of work by other artists. This catalogue itself includes nine miniatures from France and eleven from other European countries.

Overall, though, the publication is pleasing, especially *visually*. The placing of text and plate together is convenient and, while it may have been interesting to know more of the provenance of many of the pieces, it is obvious that only the information that is known can be given. The author has relied heavily upon the two major reference works in miniatures (the biographical dictionaries by Foskett and Schidlof) for much of the artists' biographical data and where these two works do not include much information he has not attempted to add further details. The fact that many of the miniatures were gifts from private donors reflects the importance of individual benefactors to public institutions such as museums and galleries. Certainly, the publication of the next catalogue, featuring the collection donated by Harrison Fraser, will be looked forward to with interest and anticipation.

Jan Roseneder
Bibliographer, Special Collections
Arts & Humanities Library
The University of Calgary