

OPAA ArtWalks Column, May 2021 Suzan Noyes

“You can’t wait for inspiration. You have to go after it with a club.” Jack London

Springtime is always an inspiring season; I know it has arrived when Washington’s unofficial state flower, the dandelion, takes over our fields and lawns.

At home, new plantings await outside, and inside, new projects. Art remains at the top of my to-do list (although sometimes it comes after *me* with a Bataka Bat, Mr. London). How fitting for a spring show that is all about small-inspired artworks shared freely for a fundraiser. A traditional OPAA event, we regret being unable to make the Small Treasures sales event a public-attended venue for 2021. The upside is that virtual viewing in our online gallery is safe and easy from the comfort of your favorite chair.

These donated petite works benefit our community by way of scholarships and other community programs. Our initial call-out to artists spread via online venues like Facebook and locally through traditional posters. It is an invitational event giving artists free rein to try out a different medium or style. The entry deadline of April 3rd garnered a grand total of 115 works of art to offer happy art collectors.

The best thing for buyers is a flat fee for these tasty little art pieces. At twenty-five dollars a pop, original art is truly affordable, this includes shipping and local delivery – how nice is that? I’ve been lucky to preview these offerings, which include jewelry, fused glass, ceramics and tapestry, in addition to drawn and painted mediums. Small Treasures indeed!



Thinking *small* made me research some early miniature paintings, which first derived from imagery in medieval prayer books. Portrait miniatures became popular from the 1600’s on. Talk about tiny – some works as small as 1 inch by 1.5 inches, painted in incredible detail. Think of life without photography available, your loved one’s face held only in your mind and

heart... It’s no surprise that miniatures became intimate family gifts. Hans Holbein and Nicholas Hilliard used a small oval painted format to be mounted in gold lockets, brooches and bracelets – jewelry as mementos. A Viennese miniaturist, Rosalba Carriera, decorated ivory snuffboxes for purchase as personal gifts.



Intrigued by how these were created, I scanned several online sites for background information.

Watercolor was used on stretched vellum (calf skin, hairless and smooth) cut to size and applied to rigid backing or English playing cards trimmed to the desired shape. In the second half of the 17th century, vitreous enamel painted on copper was popular, especially in France. By the 18th century, painters used watercolor on ivory, which had become relatively cheap. Other miniatures came framed with tiny stands or ready to hang.



Tools and materials were an art in themselves. Brushes were made of squirrel hair set in quills and mounted on wooden handles. Sometimes brushes of only one or two hairs were used.

First, find and deprive a squirrel of some fur... suggest use of gloves.

In the 16th century most artists prepared their own paints. Pigments were made from minerals, natural earths, plants, insects and gold and silver leaf or manufactured artificially. Ingredients were ground to a fine power and bound with gum arabic (hardened sap of two species of the acacia tree). This was then mixed with water in mussel shells which made convenient little pots. To polish the gold and silver used to paint the jewels and inscriptions, they used a small stoat's tooth set in a wooden handle.

First, find and dispatch a stoat... suggest pliers for postmortem tooth extraction.

Sheets of ivory were cut lengthwise from an elephant's tusk, one millimeter thick.

First, find and dispatch an elephant... (removing tusks from a large live animal is not recommended). PS Thanks to this practice and armed poachers, we are presently running low on elephants.

By the 1760's, ivory was sliced more thinly, until almost transparent. It was difficult to paint on with watercolor (ivory being greasy and non-absorbent), but the surface was roughened slightly with sandpaper or powdered pumice stone and sun-bleached to make it whiter. Some miniaturists used vinegar or garlic to de-grease. (I hope those scents faded.) More gum arabic was used with watercolors to make paint stickier. Adding liquid from a cow's gall bladder made watercolor flow more easily, allowing more freedom with a brush.



First, find and dispatch a cow... set gall bladder aside. Barbeque the remainder. Who would dream watercolor could require a bovine bladder? One hopes the remainder provided several meals for the artist's family.

In the past, being a miniaturist entailed an awful amount of work to create an itty-bitty piece of art. To read an interview by an interesting and plucky contemporary miniaturist who skips the practices listed above, use this address:

<http://broadstreetonline.org/tag/art-process/>

Artist Rebecca M.J. Hymes is quite amazing.

Many thanks to all artists who submitted work for the Small Treasures Fundraiser, OPAA salutes you!

Sample miniatures pictured are by Benjamin Trott, James Peal and Hans Holbein.