William Wood and Sir William Charles Ross: Two Great Names in British Miniature Painting

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Fig. 1 William Wood (1769–1810), Lewis (b. 1796) and Alexander (b. 1797) Beauvais, 4 March–2 April 1801. Watercolour on ivory, 9.2 x 7.5 cm, frame of lacquered wood and metal, 18 x 14.3 x 1 cm. Purchase: Hjalmar and Anna Wicander Fund. Nationalmuseum, NMB 2654.
For a long time, the Nationalmuseum’s collection of British portrait miniatures lacked works by the masters active during the final flowering of the genre in the first half of the 19th century. It was an imbalance that clearly reflected the collecting fashions of the early 20th century, but the Museum’s acquisition in 1994 of William Wood’s (1769–1810) portrait of Mrs Grace Amelia Soady, née Williams, marked a change of direction. Twenty years later, the Nationalmuseum bought another very significant work by Wood, a double portrait of the brothers Lewis and Alexander Beauvais, painted in 1801 (Fig. 1).1 Of the total of eleven multiple compositions of this kind which Wood executed, the portrait of the Beauvais boys is considered to be among his best.2 More than usual is known about the genesis of this and many other portrait miniatures by Wood, as the artist made pedantically meticulous notes on them, now preserved in three bound volumes in the National Art Library at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. In his notebooks, he recorded coded details of the pigments used, as well as the sizes chosen for his portraits. From this unique documentation it emerges that Wood had already made several portrait miniatures of members of the Beauvais family when he was commissioned to paint the two brothers. Concerning the latter portrait, he wrote: “The two Sons of Mr Beauvais, of Charles Street, Berkley Square. Begun 4 Mar, 1801. Fin’d 2 April ... Lewis with averted eye, & his hand on the shoulder of Alexr: who looks forward ... 5 & 4 years of age”.3 The double portrait of the young boys suggests an interesting psychological interplay between the two, with the one year older Lewis seemingly wavering between a protective attitude and somewhat less benevolent intentions towards his younger brother Alexander.

William Wood, who has been favourably reappraised in modern times, was one of the most innovative portrait miniaturists of the late 18th and early 19th century. This is true not least from a technical point of view: Wood experimented to further improve the stability of watercolour on ivory, an endeavour reflected above all in his many notes on materials and pigments. He also sought to raise the status of miniature painting, becoming a founder member of the New Society of Painters in Miniature and Watercolour in 1807. This was at the same time as the child prodigy of British miniature painting, William Charles Ross (1794–1860), was admitted as a student at the Royal Academy.

Ross came from a family of artists, both his parents being portraitists. He made his mark early on and collected a host of academy prizes. Originally, his sights had been set on large-format oil painting, but he soon realised that portrait miniatures were a more lucrative line of work. Although his father was a miniaturist, it was Ross’s training with his relative Andrew Robertson that determined his choice of path as an artist. During his time in Robertson’s studio, the considerable artistic talent which Ross possessed was quickly discovered, and it was not long before he was as great a name as his teacher. After painting the young Queen Victoria and the Duchess of Kent in 1837, and Albert, Prince Consort, and Adelaide, the Queen Dowager, the following year, Ross received frequent commissions from both the British royal family and their continental relatives. Reflecting his position as miniature painter to Queen Victoria, he was knighted four years later (in 1842).

Despite the advent of photography soon after this, the queen and her consort remained faithful patrons of miniature painting, and especially that of Ross, who painted his way through the whole of their extended family. Not uncommonly, he worked with large sheets of veneer-cut ivory, and he used an unusually high concentration of binder in the form of gum arabic to work up a glossy, oily surface (Fig. 2). It was not just by his format and technique, however, that Ross sought to compete with oil painting, but also on the strength of his outstanding compositional ability. His portraits often assume the character of little stories, with the result that extra emphasis is placed on the background.

Ross was famous for working quite slowly and requiring numerous sittings. Yet this does not seem to have deterred either his royal clients or members of high society. It was probably considered quite a status symbol to be immortalised by the royal miniaturist Ross. Despite the many sittings he demanded, he had all the qualities a skilled portraitist needed – not least, the ability to capture a likeness. Ross’s technical virtuosity also impresses us. In the portrait of Mrs Ackland recently acquired by the Nationalmuseum, we are fascinated by the way he is able to convey, in watercolour and with lights in gouache, the textures of the elegant white décolleté dress of the sitter, finished with blue sash.

Fig. 2 William Charles Ross (1794–1860), Unknown Man, 1841. Watercolour on ivory, 11.8 x 8.7 cm. Nationalmuseum, NMB 2586.
Fig. 3 William Charles Ross (1794–1860), *Unknown Woman, called Mrs Ackland*, before 1860. Watercolour on ivory, 10.7 x 8.4 cm, gilt-metal frame, 19.5 x 14 x 2 cm. Purchase: Hjalmar and Anna Wicander Fund. Nationalmuseum, NMB 2655.
ribbon and pleated panels edged with lace trim.\textsuperscript{4} Everything is captured with an illusionistic agility that lends a magical shimmer to the opulent fabrics (Fig. 3).

Even more striking, perhaps, is Ross’s rendering of another accessory, the large coral necklace Mrs Ackland is wearing, which becomes something of a centrepiece of the portrait. It is an unusually lavish piece, with the elaborate form of a negligee – a necklace terminating in two tassels that was made in a variety of materials, ranging from diamonds to seed pearls with gold filigree, turquoises and pearls etc. In France, the term is \textit{bayadère}, referring to the Indian origin of the style.\textsuperscript{5} Necklaces of this kind had their heyday at the beginning of the 19th century, but remained popular in early Victorian times. It may be assumed that, to Mrs Ackland, this necklace was not just a fashionable item of jewellery, but also one linked to an important moment in her life.

Sir William Charles Ross would not have been the greatest miniaturist of his day if he had not also had a keen psychological eye. This is particularly evident in his portrait of Mrs Ackland. Here, the background is toned down. The whole weight of the portrait is carried, rather, by the costume accessories and the powerful charisma of the sitter. The broad frame of fire-gilded bronze, too, is unusually exclusive, with its rich foliate border in typical Victorian Rococo Revival style. The place of this portrait was not in the dark recesses of a drawer, but on display in a sumptuous upper-class home.

Notes:
\begin{enumerate}
\item Nationalmuseum, NMB 2654. Acquired with funding from the Anna and Hjalmar Wicander Fund at Bonhams, \textit{The Richard Allen Collection of Fine Portrait Miniatures}, 21 May 2014, lot 60.
\item Nationalmuseum, NMB 2655. Acquired with funding from the Anna and Hjalmar Wicander Fund at Bonhams, \textit{The Richard Allen Collection of Fine Portrait Miniatures}, 21 May 2014, lot 73.
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