

MOURNING AND PORTRAITURE

Miniature Displays of Mourning in Jane Austen's Time

During Jane Austen's lifetime, there was a great demand for commemorative miniature portraits. In part, as Graham Reynolds suggests, this was due to the near doubling of the population between 1700 and 1800 and the growth in wealth of the average person. Getting one's portrait painted during the Renaissance period was primarily limited to the aristocracy; yet, by the eighteenth century, a much broader class of consumers had the social pretension and wealth to commission miniatures for themselves and their families. Miniatures were commissioned to mark important life events such as births, engagements, marriages, deaths, and leave-takings. They could take the shape of rings, lockets, brooches, or other forms of jewelry and decoration. Miniatures could be worn on the body or they could be displayed in the home.

By the eighteenth century, the innovations of the Venetian artist Rosalba Carriera brought miniaturist painters to work on ivory with traditional watercolours. Ivory gave paintings a much greater luminosity than other canvases and allowed artists to save on labor as they could let the ivory show through the face.

Using ivory for miniatures, painters had to work quickly and deftly for the color not to run and, given the demands of the market,

miniaturists were encouraged to work quickly and generally. Painting miniatures could be very lucrative, as it was in the case of the painter Joshua Reynolds (1723-1792), whose work Austen saw in person. A painter of miniature portraits could possibly produce up to ten miniatures a day working in efficient studio systems. However, this mass-production and commodification of the miniature meant that the representation of the individual sometimes became lost in the depiction of an ideal. Over time, the miniature began to reflect less of the individual being remembered than the taste of the miniature's owner.



Pietro Antonio Martini (1739-1797). Close-up of "The Exhibition of the Royal Hall, 1787."
Courtesy British Museum.

Discussion Questions

Question 1

Analyzing a letter that Jane Austen sent her nephew, James Edward Austen, in 1816, Jillian Heydt-Stevenson argues that Austen's description of herself as "work[ing] with so fine a Brush" on "the little bit (two Inches wide) of Ivory" suggests that she "self-consciously affiliate[d] herself with the famous miniaturists (many of them women) who flourished during the Romantic period" (pg. 155).

- Does Austen's work actually resemble that of a miniature painter's, given the contextual information we have discussed regarding the production of miniature painting?
- Is Austen being self-deprecating when she likens her work to the ivory miniature?

To James Edward Austen.

Monday 16 & Tuesday 17 December 1816.

What should I do with your strong, manly, spirited Sketches, full of variety & Glow?—How could I possibly join them on to the little bit (two Inches wide) of Ivory on which I work with so fine a Brush, as produces little effect after much labour?

Jane Austen



Question 2

Consider the different examples of mourning-wear that Austen represents in *Persuasion* and what people make of those wearing mourning-wear. Do you agree with Christiane Holm's argument that "[t]he focus of mourning is no longer the mourned and their fame but instead the mourners and their mourning" (pg. 139)?

- What do Elizabeth Elliot's black ribbons (Chapter 1, pg. 10) and the clothes of Mr Elliot and his servant (Chapter 12, pgs. 96-97) say about their mourning for the late Mrs. Elliot?
- Lady Russell begins to calculate the number of weeks which would free Mr Elliot to marry Anne in Chapter 17 (pg. 149). What do you make of her treatment of mourning-wear? What does it say about her?

Question 3

Return to the climactic moment in Chapter 23 (pg. 218) where Anne and Captain Harville discuss the miniature portrait.

- How do you interpret Harville's disappointment with the resetting of the miniature for Louisa Musgrove?
- Given the obsessions with formally defined spans of mourning in other parts of the text, what do you make of Anne and Captain Harville's reflections on the length of mourning?

*To Cassandra Austen.
Friday 17 May 1799.*

In Paragon we met M^{rs} Foley & M^{rs} Dowdeswell with her yellow shawl airing out— & at the bottom of Kingsdown Hill we met a Gentleman in a Buggy, who on a minute examination turned out to be D^r Hall— & D^r Hall in such very deep mourning that either his Mother, his Wife, or himself must be dead.

Jane Austen

“...Captain Wentworth should be allowed some credit for the self-command with which he attended to her large fat sighings over the destiny of a son, whom alive nobody had cared for.”

- PERSUASION, CH. 8, 63

Question 4

Compare and contrast the “portrait” of two mourners set side-by-side in Chapter 8 of *Persuasion*: Anne Eliot and Mrs. Musgrove.

- Are readers supposed to think Anne and Mrs. Musgrove equally ridiculous in their acts of mourning?
- Are their acts of mourning different from each other in significant ways?

Question 5

Joshua Reynolds believed that “a portrait should be executed in such a way as to provide a familiar but generalized form upon which the viewers could project their own more detailed conceptions of the subject” (Bertelsen, pg. 361). As we know from her letters, Austen not only saw Reynolds's portraits in person, but evinced her disappointment with them.

- Do you think that Austen's aesthetic and writerly impulses align with Reynolds?
- How exactly does Austen execute her portraits?

References

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- To Cassandra Austen.
Monday, 24 May 1813.
- Henry & I went to the Exhibition in Spring Gardens. It is not thought a good collection, but I was very well pleased—particularly (pray tell Fanny) with a small portrait of M^{rs} Bingley, excessively like her. I went in hopes of seeing one of her Sister, but there was no M^{rs} Darcy;—perhaps however, I may find her in the Great Exhibition. which we shall go to, if we have time;—I have no chance of her in the collection of Sir Joshua Reynolds's Paintings which is now shewing in Pall Mall, & which we are also to visit.—M^{rs} Bingley's is exactly herself, size, shaped face, features & sweetness; there never was a greater likeness. She is dressed in a white gown, with green ornaments, which convinces me of what I had always supposed, that green was a favourite colour with her. I dare say M^{rs} D. will be in Yellow.*
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"He had, in fact, though his sisters were now doing all they could for him, by calling him "poor Richard," been nothing better than a thick-headed, unfeeling, unprofitable Dick Musgrove, who had never done anything to entitle himself to more than the abbreviation of his name, living or dead."

- PERSUASION, CH. 6, 48

Jane Austen