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Miniature Masterworks

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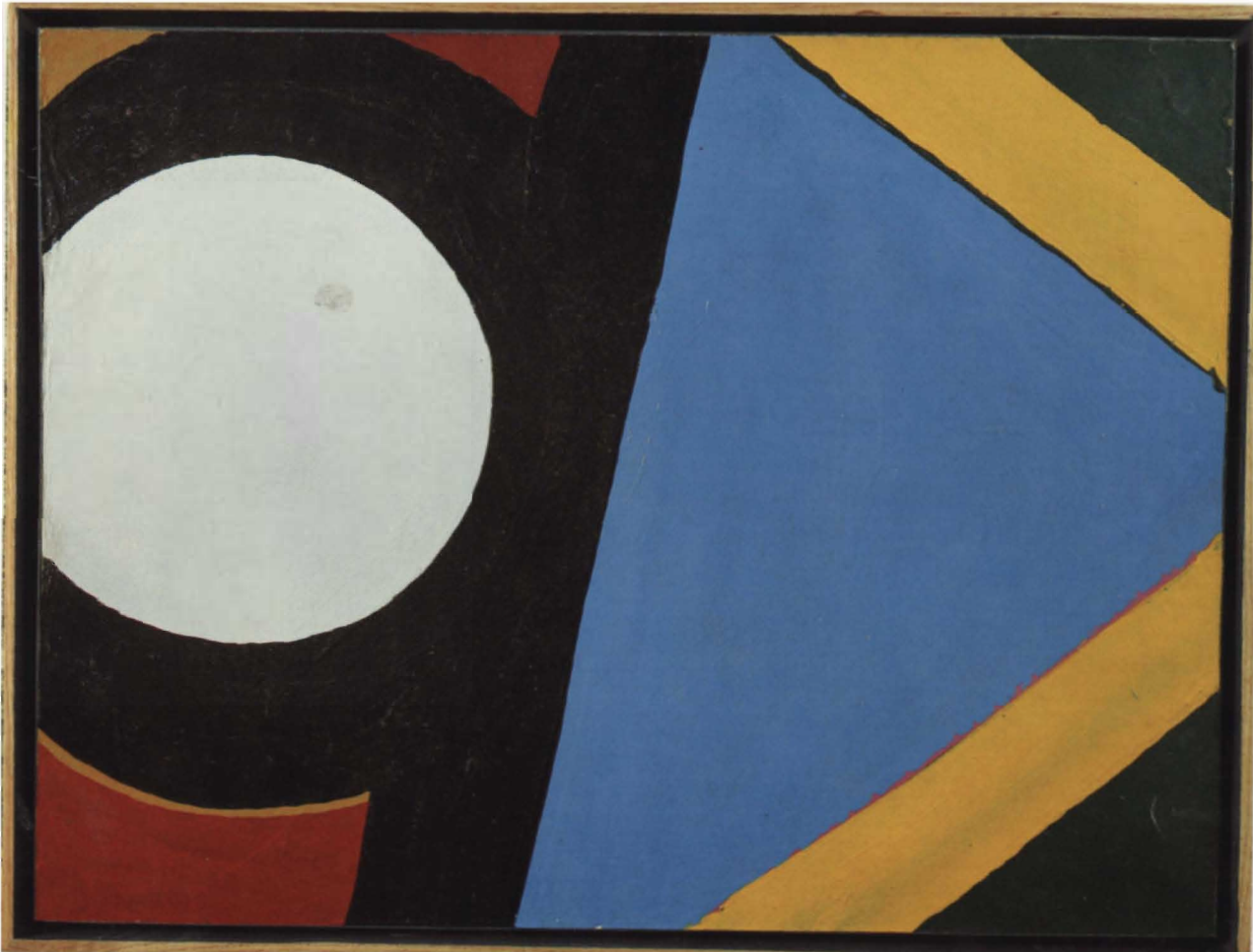


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MINIATURE MASTERWORKS



Al Held, *Composition*, c. 1962-65, oil on board, 18 $\frac{1}{4}$ " \times 24 $\frac{3}{16}$ ",
Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, University of Nebraska-Lincoln,
Gift of Mrs. Harriet Wiener.

A CIRCULATING EXHIBITION
From The Permanent Collection Of The
Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery



Ralph Blakelock, *Landscape*, c. 1917, oil on cardboard, 8" × 8",
Nebraska Art Association, Nelle Cochrane Woods Memorial
Collection, Courtesy of Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery,
University of Nebraska–Lincoln.

Miniature does not merely mean small. When applied to painting, the term “miniature” conveys art historical and psychological meanings of greater import than simple dimensions may indicate. “Miniature Masterworks” offers a diverse group of undersized paintings which are related by virtue of their size, but which reveal larger issues pertinent to the history of twentieth century art.

While artists have used the miniature format throughout the history of art, the tradition of small scale paintings was rather recently reestablished in America, via the French. In part as a reaction to large, Neoclassical paintings commissioned by grand patrons, and depicting ideal themes, Plein Aire painters and the Impressionists of the 1880s adopted the use of moderate-sized canvases for their depictions of everyday reality and natural phenomena. Smaller canvases also satisfied the artist’s practical need to transport the paintings while working outdoors. By the early twentieth century, American collectors were actively importing Impressionism, and thereby transforming American taste from the large, nineteenth century academic style to the more personal observations of independent artists. Cross-cultural influences were immediately evident, as American artists adopted and interpreted the French Impressionist style.

Concurrent with this art historical evolution was a socio-economic change following the Industrial revolution. The rise of the American middle class and their new access to fine art made the

Impressionists’ reduced format appropriate for informal settings in smaller houses. The smaller scale also reflected a rejection of Victorian social hierarchies and new possibilities for an approachable art. This preference for smaller paintings prevailed through the first half of the century, until the late 1940s, when the Abstract Expressionists revolutionized the concept of the painting field, expanding it to make room for their bodies as well as their minds. Such a radical reevaluation of scale effected the viewer as well as the artist.

As with any major art movement, the dominance of Abstract Expressionism led to stylistic counter-currents. Even during the height of the Abstract Expressionist period smaller paintings fulfilled the artist’s need to investigate issues on an intimate scale. But, more specifically, the tradition of small works has continued because it provides the artist with a particular kind of introspection, and attention to detail. The viewer, in his proximity to the painting surface, is inclined to share the artist’s vantage point and interest in the diminutive aesthetic.

While size does not dictate any one artistic motivation or style, the minimal distance between the painting and the presence of the viewer establishes an intimacy of equivalent scale, a phenomenon which is particularly apparent when perceiving the miniature landscape. The small painting is generally proportionate to the viewer’s head, and seen at eye level. This direct alignment with the human scale is virtually impossible to achieve when the canvas looms larger

than the human form. Small landscapes invite the viewer to perceive a painted world in a singular, microcosmic experience of time and space. In effect, the small scale landscape encourages us to assume an omniscient stance. By reducing reality, the artist renders it more comprehensible than nature itself. We perceive a resolved scene from the secure position of complete comprehension. The small landscape provides a consoling respite from the enormity of life—an idyl of constancy, contained and understood within the confines of the frame.

Among the many landscapes seen in “Miniature Masterworks”, Ralph Blakelock’s *Landscape*, 1917, exemplifies the phenomenon of equivalent scale. Here the viewer shares the painting’s space in a close-range encounter with the small object at eye level. We immediately perceive the depth, color and atmosphere as a total statement late in this troubled artist’s career. Blakelock’s intense palette, combined with a traditional one-point perspective receding toward the horizon, suggests an idyllic, but transitory moment, like a fleeting glimpse of Eden, retained on this small canvas.

When considering the aesthetics of a miniature painting, it is essential to understand the alternative effects of a large work. Unlike the intimate encounter with a small painting, the encompassing presence of an oversized painting is intended to overwhelm us, to encompass us with visual information which cannot be ascertained in one close glance. Rather, the large work can be understood only after thorough perusal and considerable flexing of the retinal muscles, from an appropriate distance. The viewer’s participatory role requires one to “enter” the large work. The painting thus dictates the spatial terms, relegating the observer to a subordinate position relative to the dominance of the large painting. The impact of a large work, as it hangs parallel to the viewer’s entire standing presence, effects the entire person, while one confronts a miniature painting exclusively with one’s eye. In this way, small scale works maintain a more personal dialogue with the viewer, an immediate exchange of information and interpretation.

While size determines a physical response, it can more readily present a cerebral context for the artist’s ideas. The eye-level access to the small canvas, and the sense one has of looking deep into the frame, rather than across a broad surface, suggests a quality of memory. Like a visual journal, the artist’s perceptions are recorded for the viewer’s consideration. A painting such as M.L. Schamberg’s *Regatta*, 1907, conveys a sense of clarity and calm, a captured moment akin to a picture postcard, that most familiar vehicle of nostalgia. We do not feel intimidated by this pleasant seascape. Rather, we revel at our leisure in the sunny light, perhaps recalling



Morton Schamberg, *The Regatta*, 1907, oil on cardboard 10" × 15", Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, University of Nebraska–Lincoln, F. M. Hall Collection.

similar summer days in our own past. This quality of memory is a direct result of the diminutive scale. We can possess the moment, but only from a psychic distance, as we do the past. The same scene rendered in a larger format would tend to include us, to place us in another boat on the same sea.

The comfortable vantage point determined by the small landscape is also maintained when one encounters a small abstraction, such as Al Held’s *Composition*, 1962-65. Though Held’s concern is for the flat color forms, rather than Blakelock’s illusionism, we meet the painting with the assurance born of its human scale. Held’s relationships between textures, colors and forms are readily apparent at close range. Just as a miniature landscape implies a memory, the small abstraction functions as an illustrated thought, an intellectual exercise from the artist’s to the viewer’s mind. A small abstraction tends to present the resolution to a problem, while the large abstraction refers more to an artistic process. In *Composition*, Held posits a symbiosis between the bold color forms and the small size. While the composition could have been successfully executed in a large format, the emphatic shapes seem to defy their limited confines, and thus to appear more powerful than the reduced scale would suggest. This dynamic tension relies on the small size of the canvas. In *Composition*, size is not an incidental factor, but an active component of the painting itself.

Wayne Thiebaud uses the miniature scale to entice us. With *Cupcake*, we are confronted with the vigorous surface of impasto, which perfectly mimics the luscious frosting on that all-American delicacy, the cupcake. Because we must approach the painting at close range, we are forced to confront all the subtleties of texture and gesture that Thiebaud has loaded onto the small surface. He creates a literal sensuousness of paint which directly parallels the illusion of the colorful confection. Thus the image and the ground are united in the common tactility of paint and cupcake.

Regardless of the subject matter, all the paintings in “Miniature Masterworks” promote an intimacy initiated by scale. As a result of our close scrutiny, we feel we know these paintings. For a moment we exist within the shared creative triad—the artist, the object and the viewer. We leave the small painting feeling as though we have learned of a secret, or had a meaningful conversation with a good friend. Though the course of art history is varied and circuitous, the special pleasure of creating or viewing a miniature painting will continue as one of the most revelatory forms of personal expression.

Daphne Anderson Deeds
Curator



Wayne Thiebaud, *Cupcake*, 1961, oil on canvas, 7" × 9", Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, University of Nebraska–Lincoln, Gift of Mrs. Olga N. Sheldon.

Checklist

- Thomas Anshutz (1851-1912), *Portrait of the Artist's Aunt, Aunt Emily Fairchild Pollock* (verso: *Still Life with Cast*), oil on board, 13 7/16" × 11", Howard S. Wilson Memorial Collection
- Ben Benn (1884-1983), *Still Life with Pineapple*, 1947, oil on masonite, 15" × 12", Nebraska Art Association, gift of Mr. and Mrs. Frederick S. Seacrest
- Isabel Bishop (1902-), *Union Square*, c. 1931, oil on canvas, 14" × 17", Nebraska Art Association, Nelle Cochrane Woods Memorial Collection
- Ralph Blakelock (1847-1919), *Landscape*, c. 1917, oil on cardboard, 8" × 8", Nebraska Art Association, Nelle Cochrane Woods Memorial Collection
- William Merritt Chase (1849-1916), *Woman in Interior*, oil on panel, 15 1/4" × 18 3/4", Nebraska Art Association, Nelle Cochrane Woods Memorial Collection
- Robert Bruce Crane (1856-1937), *Gray December Day*, 1918, oil on canvas, 12" × 16", Bequest of Mr. and Mrs. Frank M. Hall
- Arthur B. Davies (1862-1928), *Peach Stream Valley*, c. 1914-15, oil on canvas, 8 1/8" × 15", Nebraska Art Association, Thomas C. Woods Memorial Collection
- Thomas Doughty (1793-1856), *Hudson River*, oil on canvas, 14" × 17", Nebraska Art Association, Nelle Cochrane Woods Memorial Collection
- Walter Gay (1856-1937), *Interior at Pont Aven*, c. 1900, oil on panel, 13 5/8" × 10 1/8", Nebraska Art Association, gift of Cliff Hillegass
- Alan Gussow (1931-), *Terrace in the Sun*, oil on panel, 9 5/8" × 13", University Collection, gift of Mrs. Olga N. Sheldon
- Marsden Hartley (1877-1943), *Old Stone Wall, Dogtown*, 1931, oil on cardboard mounted on masonite, 10" × 21 3/16", University Collection, Bequest of Bertha Schaefer
- Al Held (1928-), *Composition*, c. 1962-65, oil on board, 18 1/4" × 24 3/16", University Collection, gift of Mrs. Harriet Wiener
- George Inness (1825-1894), *Italian Landscape*, c. 1872, oil on canvas, 11 3/4" × 17 1/4", F. M. Hall Collection
- Lee Jackson (1909-), *Stock Handlers, Rodeo*, oil on board, 8 1/2" × 17 1/2", University Collection, gift of Mrs. Olga N. Sheldon
- Keith Jacobshagen (1941-), *Havelock Elevator: Early Spring*, 1978, oil on masonite, 16" × 24", F. M. Hall Collection
- John Kane (1860-1934), *Fourth of July Parade*, 1930, oil on canvas, 16 3/4" × 14", Nebraska Art Association, Nelle Cochrane Woods Memorial Collection
- Alice Trumbull Mason (1904-1971), *Trinity #10*, 1969, oil on canvas, 16 1/4" × 18", Nebraska Art Association, gift of Mr. and Mrs. Wolf Kahn

Schedule of Venues

August 10–September 8, 1987
Museum of Nebraska Art, Kearney

September 28–October 28, 1987
Norfolk Art Center, Norfolk

October 29–November 23, 1987
North Platte Mall, North Platte

December 7, 1987–January 5, 1988
Hastings Public Library, Hastings

January 5–February 12, 1988
First National Bank of Aurora, Aurora

February 15–March 28, 1988
Pender Public Library, Pender

March 28–April 18, 1988
Dana College, Blair

June 20–July 20, 1988
Robert Henri Museum, Cozad

"Miniature Masterworks" is made possible by a grant from the Bostrom Fund of the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, and the Nebraska Art Association. During the 1987-1988 year, which is the centennial of the Nebraska Art Association, "Miniature Masterworks" will travel to eight venues throughout the state of Nebraska. "Miniature Masterworks" fulfills the Sheldon Gallery's ongoing objective to provide the people of Nebraska with visual art of the highest quality.