1988

Miniature Masterworks

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

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.
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 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 state 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. Schambreg's Regatta, 1907, conveys a sense of clarity and calm, a captured moment akin to a picture postcard, yet the familiar vehicle of nostalgia. We do not feel intimidated by this pleasant seaside. Rather, we revel at our leisure in the sunny light, perhaps recalling 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

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

Wayne Thiebaud, Cupcake, 1961, oil on canvas, 7" x 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, 15 7/16" x 11", Howard S. Wilson Memorial Collection

Ben Benn (1884-1983), Still Life with Pineapple, 1947, oil on masonite, 15" x 12", Nebraska Art Association, gift of Mr. and Mrs. Frederick S. Seacrest

Isabel Bishop (1902- ), Union Square, c. 1931, oil on canvas, 14" x 17", Nebraska Art Association, Nelle Cochrane Woods Memorial Collection

Ralph Blakelock (1847-1919), Landscape, c. 1917, oil on cardboard, 8" x 8", Nebraska Art Association, Nelle Cochrane Woods Memorial Collection

William Merritt Chase (1849-1916), Woman in Interior, oil on panel, 15 1/4" x 18 3/4", Nebraska Art Association, Nelle Cochrane Woods Memorial Collection

Robert Bruce Crane (1856-1937), Gray December Day, 1918, oil on canvas, 12" x 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" x 15", Nebraska Art Association, Thomas C. Woods Memorial Collection

Thomas Doughty (1793-1856), Hudson River, oil on canvas, 14" x 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" x 10 1/8", Nebraska Art Association, gift of Cliff Hillegass

Alan Gussow (1931- ), Terrace in the Sun, oil on panel, 9 5/8" x 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" x 21 3/16", University Collection, Bequest of Bertha Schaefer

Al Held (1928- ), Composition, c. 1962-65, oil on board, 18 1/4" x 24 3/16", University Collection, gift of Mrs. Harriet Wiener

George Inness (1825-1894), Italian Landscape, c. 1872, oil on canvas, 11 3/4" x 17 1/4", F. M. Hall Collection

Lee Jackson (1909- ), Stock Handlers, Rodeo, oil on board, 8 1/2" x 17 1/2", University Collection, gift of Mrs. Olga N. Sheldon

Keith Jacobshagen (1941- ), Havelock Elevator: Early Spring, 1978, oil on masonite, 16" x 24", F. M. Hall Collection

John Kane (1860-1934), Fourth of July Parade, 1930, oil on canvas, 16 3/4" x 14", Nebraska Art Association, Nelle Cochrane Woods Memorial Collection

Alice Trumbull Mason (1904-1971), Trinity #10, 1969, oil on canvas, 16 1/4" x 18", Nebraska Art Association, gift of Mr. and Mrs. Wolf Kahn

Schedule of Venues

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"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.