

**PORTRAIT  
MINIATURES, 1910**

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Portrait Miniatures, 1910 by Dr. George Charles Williamson & Charles Holme

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**DR. GEORGE CHARLES WILLIAMSON & CHARLES HOLME**

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## PORTRAIT MINIATURES. BY DR. G. C. WILLIAMSON.

A RECENT French writer, in referring to the art of portrait painting, exalted it to the highest rank, proclaiming it the greatest of all arts. He then proceeded, by a series of curious antithetical sentences, to set forth his opinion of portrait painting, stating that it was at once the oldest and the most modern of arts, the easiest and the most difficult, the simplest and the most abstruse, the clearest and the most subtle. His statement, it is clear, contained a definite basis of truth, coupled with a certain interesting extravagance of expression. It is quite true that to draw a portrait was the aim of the very earliest of draughtsmen, whether it was that of his companion or of one of the beasts of chase, and whether he carved it on a bone, or daubed it on the wall of his dwelling. The first endeavour, also, of a child, playing with a pencil, or a brush, is to draw a portrait, and the very simplest outline does occasionally reveal that an idea of portraiture is latent in the mind of the young artist. If only simplicity of line is desired, nothing can be more simple, while at the same time nothing is more perfect, than the outline or profile drawing of such a great artist as Holbein, or the work of some of the early French draughtsmen.

At the same time, the subtlety of this draughtsmanship cannot be denied. For complexity and difficulty, portraiture takes a supreme place, and yet, on the other hand, as the Frenchman points out in his antithetical sentences, it is to a certain extent a simple art, and we all know artists who are able with a piece of chalk to suggest an even startling likeness which they would be quite unable to complete into the form of a perfect portrait. Many a painter thinks at first that portraiture is simple and easy, in fact he finds it so, but the older he grows, the more does he realise that the human features are complex in the extreme, and that the variations of expression make the difficulties in the task of portraying them enormous. From very early times, however, there has been a natural desire to have portraits of the persons about us, and to have these portraits in portable form; hence, after a long succession of vicissitudes, has come the miniature.

It is perhaps as well, even though the statement has been made over and over again, to emphasize the fact that the actual word miniature has nothing whatever to do with the size of the portrait. We accept it, however, as implying that the portrait is of portable size, and we shall apply it to such a portrait as can lie in the palm of one's hand, ignoring the fact that the word was originally derived from "minium" or red lead, and has come down to us from the little

portraits on illuminated manuscripts, outlined or bordered with lines of red. In two countries especially, the art of painting miniatures has flourished, England and France, and in these two countries there have been schools of miniature painters, and a succession of great exponents of the art, while in the other countries of Europe there have only been now and again painters who have devoted especial attention to this branch of their art, and have taken high position in it. It is more especially an English art, because, although for exquisite grace, charming colouring, and dainty conception, the works of the French miniature painters take a high rank, even they must yield the palm for representation of character to the greatest English painter of miniatures, Samuel Cooper. Moreover, in no country but England has there been such a long series of painters in miniature, extending from the sixteenth century down to comparatively recent times.

It has been the fashion to commence a survey of English miniature painters by reference to Holbein, and it is not altogether an unsatisfactory manner in which to start (although Holbein was not an Englishman), because so many of his best works were painted in this country. It must not, however, be forgotten that portrait painting was practised by native English artists in the early part, or at least in the middle, of the fifteenth century, and although we know very little indeed about these English painters, yet we have many works remaining which must be attributed to them.

It may, moreover, be stated generally that the predecessors and contemporaries of Holbein in miniature work were mostly of foreign extraction, although working in England; such, for example, as Lavina Terlinck and Gwilym Stretes. We know, however, that certain fourteenth-century manuscripts were actually executed in England, by an English artist, and as an example of such work, Mr. Lionel Cust, in his preface to the English Portraiture Exhibition at the Burlington Fine Arts Club, points out the Salisbury Lectionarium, with the portrait of Lord Lovell as its frontispiece, representing him receiving the book from its maker, John Siferwas. He refers also to the even better known portrait of Chaucer, painted by Occlive on the manuscript now in the British Museum.

There is also no question that the actual art of portrait miniature, such as we understand it at the present day, arose from that of painting portraits on manuscripts, and, as we have already pointed out in another place, it may further be derived from the similar portraits attached to treaties and to documents handed over to ambassadors. The illumination of a portrait of Francis I. on the ratification of a treaty of peace with England, August 18th, 1527, is a case in point. It represents the French King in excellent fashion, delineating character as well as portraiture, and is the work

of a painter of no mean skill and discernment. Similar portraits of Henry VIII., and Philip and Mary, dated 1543 and 1556, and painted in England, are not of such a high character as is the one of Francis, but still are sufficient to enable us to regard them as true portraits, representative of the monarchs as they were. Who first, says Mr. Cust, cut out the portrait in miniature from an illumination, and inserted it in a jewelled or ivory case or picture-box, it is impossible to surmise, but such a caprice, once started, was likely quickly to become popular. Who first gave up the use of vellum for such portraits, and found that a playing card in use at that day was a more convenient material on which to paint, we also do not know; nor who, again, stretched a very fine piece of vellum or chicken-skin upon the playing-card, and used that as his basis, but the earliest Elizabethan miniatures painted in England are done in one of these two methods.

Prominent amongst the names of the Tudor painters stands out that of Hans Holbein the younger, and in the art of composition it is doubtful whether any successor has equalled him in consummate skill. The illustration which we are allowed to give from Mr. Pierpont Morgan's collection, and which represents *Mrs. Pemberton* (Plate I.), is one of the most astonishing works ever produced by a miniature painter. The figure is so perfectly composed, and so marvellously set within the small compass of the circle, while the modelling is so subtle and delicate, so refined, and distinguished by such perfection of line and economy of material that it is always a delight to regard it, and no portrait painter would be ashamed to say that he had learned many a lesson from the unerring skill with which this marvellous portrait is produced. It cannot be said that all Holbein's works are on as high a level as is this particular picture, but the two portraits in the possession of the Queen of Holland, one representing a young lady, and the other an older man; the portrait of the painter in the possession of the Duke of Buccleuch; the wonderful *Anne of Cleves* in the collection of the late Mr. George Salting; and the companion one of Henry VIII. in Mr. Pierpont Morgan's cabinet, are all distinguished by the same perfection of draughtsmanship and skill of composition. In Holbein we have, therefore, a fitting master, from whom to start the long series of miniature painters, which in England extended away down to the beginning of the nineteenth century, or even perhaps a little later, and in his successor, Nicholas Hilliard, we find the first of the masters who was actually an Englishman born and bred.

From whom Hilliard learned his art it is impossible to tell. It would be most interesting could we decide if he ever came into contact with Holbein, and hardly less so were we able to determine