

The Female Miniaturist 1680-1840: Recovering lives, practices and representations



WRoCAH funded Collaborative Doctoral Award between School of English, University of Sheffield and National Portrait Gallery

Lead Academic and Partner Organisation Supervisors

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Project summary

This project is a collaboration between the University of Sheffield and the National Portrait Gallery. It investigates an overlooked aspect of female artistic practice: the portrait miniature. During the period 1680 to 1840, miniature production was increasingly dominated by women, yet there is no definitive study of the female miniaturist: her importance obscured by a focus on male counterparts, and her achievements sidelined by an increasingly institutionalised art world. In reconstructing the lives and practices of female miniaturists in the period, the project will draw on the National Portrait Gallery's rich collection of miniatures and archival material as well as a range of literary and non-literary sources. The result will be an important contribution to the history of art and culture in the period.

PhD Project description

The late seventeenth to the early nineteenth century was the heyday of miniature painting in Britain. Miniatures were celebrated in exhibitions at the Royal Academy from its foundation in 1768, and women were among the exhibitors. Yet, this period also saw the marginalisation of women as art

practitioners. The institutionalisation and professionalisation of the art world, together with the emergence of cultural norms that prized feminine domesticity, politeness, and social propriety, relegated women's position, leaving them in an uncertain limbo between amateur and professional, and dependent on the proclivities of their male relatives and patrons.

This marginalisation is mirrored in modern scholarship, which has overwhelmingly neglected female miniaturists – a situation that is all the more striking, as literary representations suggest that the common cultural perception at the time was that the majority of miniaturists were women. This project rectifies this neglect, offering the first focused study of the lives and practices of the female miniaturist in this period, with a particular reference to their representation in literature and in practice. The focus of the PhD thesis will be shaped by the successful candidate, but the key research questions include:

- Who were Britain's female miniaturists in this period and how did they negotiate the boundaries between amateur and professional?
- How was the female miniaturist and her art represented in literary and non-literary sources, and what light does this shed on her status?
- How did the social and cultural barriers faced by women in the period impact female miniaturists and how did they attempt to overcome them?

The sources for the project centre on the rich collections held at the National Portrait Gallery, which include archival materials and works by female miniaturists, including Margaret Gillies, Mary Ann Flaxman, Mary Barret, Elizabeth Walker and Sarah Biffin. The NPG also has crucial research resources: the national reference collection of photographs of historic British portraits in public and private collections, extensive records of private collections, and a new conservation studio with equipment for the comparative analysis of miniatures. The research will be developed through an analysis of literary representations of the female miniaturist from across the period, along with further archival and print sources.

Through this, the project makes an important contribution to scholarly understandings of women's significance in the history of eighteenth-century art and culture. First, building on a tradition of feminist art history, there has been a recent focus on women artists in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (evident in Tate Britain's *Now You See Us* exhibition in 2024). By investigating a key female artistic practice in this period – the miniature – the project is an original and important study in this field. Secondly, the analysis of literary representations is crucial to the research, but also significant in itself:

there is to date no systematic study of the figure of the female miniaturist in drama, poetry and novels. Thirdly, and more broadly, the project challenges the longstanding low status of female activities in both histories of the decorative arts and in working life.

About National Portrait Gallery

The National Portrait Gallery was founded in 1856 with the aim of collecting portraits of 'the most eminent persons in British history'. The original Trustees agreed 'to look at the celebrity of the person represented rather than the merit of the artist' but also took the view that achievement would sometimes be tempered by human fallibility accepting that 'great faults and errors' should not exclude individuals from inclusion. The role remains the same today – telling the story of the nation through the people who shape it – although we have broadened our understanding of achievement to reflect the diversity and dynamism of contemporary culture.

We are committed to the employment and development of disabled people. When assessing and shortlisting our candidate pool for interviews, we are committed to removing any bias through our process to ensure all individuals with a disability are included. To be invited to the interview stage, you must show through your application that you meet the minimum criteria and/or the desirable skills required for the role. If you tell us that you have a disability we can make reasonable adjustments at interview, and, if you join us, to your work arrangements.

Successful candidates will be required to undergo a Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) check as part of the hiring process.

Engagement, outreach, dissemination and impact initiatives

The student's research findings will be disseminated in a variety of ways, allowing them to gain experience in writing for, and communicating with, different audiences. These will include: a display drawn from the National Portrait Gallery's miniatures collection in the 'Making Miniatures, 1600-1850' gallery, online labels for works in the NPG's collection, longer form pieces on the NPG's website and a visually-led archive resource on female miniaturists, that would be accessible in the NPG's Public Study Room to facilitate ongoing research. We also anticipate that the student will disseminate their findings to academic audiences via relevant conferences and publications.

In addition the student will have the opportunity to undertake a placement at the NPG, which could include working in the new conservation studio.

Financial support

Studentships for doctoral research are 40 months in duration for full-time study. Awards are subject to satisfactory academic progress. Awards must be taken up in October 2025; no deferrals are possible as this is the final round of recruitment to WRoCAH Studentships. Awards will comprise fees at Research Council rates and a tax- and national insurance-free maintenance grant (£20,780 in 2025/26). The grant pays the fees at the Home/UK rate; international students are, however, eligible to apply for this Studentship. It is possible that the difference between the Home/UK and International fee may be met by the University of Sheffield for a successful international applicant. Awards may be taken up on a part-time basis if a student is eligible to undertake part-time study; international applicants may be required to study full-time under the terms of their visa.

Qualifications

Strong applicants will have a good first degree in an appropriate subject, as well as a Master's degree (or be working towards one), usually at Distinction level, or professional experience relevant to the scope of the project.

Requirements of the Studentship

This opportunity is being offered as a full time studentship but part time study may be an option subject to agreement with the supervision team.

WRoCAH students are required to undertake a bespoke training package and to complete a Researcher Employability Project of at least a month and a Knowledge Exchange Project.

All WRoCAH students must submit their thesis for examination with the funded period. This is a requirement of the Arts & Humanities Research Council, which provides the funding for WRoCAH, and is a condition of accepting a Studentship.

Before applying for any WRoCAH Studentship, please first ensure that you have read the WRoCAH webpages about the WRoCAH

training programme and requirements, as well as other funding opportunities

<http://wrocah.ac.uk/>

How to apply

By 12 noon Wednesday 5 March 2025, applicants are required to submit to WRoCAH an Expression of Interest, which should include:

1. A CV with details of academic qualifications
2. A covering letter comprising a two-page statement to convey your motivation and enthusiasm for the project, and to demonstrate your suitability for your intended PhD studies with the University and Project Partner.

The covering letter should specifically highlight the following:

- Your interest in the project and details on why you have chosen that University and Project Partner.
 - How you will apply your current skills, knowledge and experience to undertake a PhD and the approach you would take to develop the project.
 - How the project fits into your career plans and ambitions.
- 17 March 2025: decision on short-listing
The short-list of candidates to be invited for an interview will be announced on Monday 17 March 2025.
 - *Short-listed candidates must complete a PhD programme application before interview.* If you are short-listed for an interview you will be sent details of how to apply for a place at the University of Sheffield. At that point you will need to submit the names and contact details of two referees, copies of transcripts of your academic qualifications and (if applicable) an IELTS certificate.
 - 11 April 2025: interviews

Interviews will involve the academic supervisor, Project Partner supervisor and a member of the WRoCAH Studentships Committee. They will be conducted online.

For more information about this project contact

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