



Michael's Museum

FEATURING ANTIQUE MINIATURE PORTRAITS
OF THE TORMEY-HOLDER COLLECTION

MINIATURE INSIGHTS: THE INSPIRATION BEHIND THE COLLECTION

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As any collector of miniature portraits can relate, I am often asked how I came to learn about miniature portraits and what inspired me to begin collecting them. Of course, such questions are not surprising, given how few people today have even a slight familiarity with the art form. In centuries past, miniature portraits were considered priceless possessions. Today, they are largely enigmas.

Admittedly, I too was long oblivious to the existence of miniature portraits – that is, until by chance I stumbled across a miniature portrait of one of my own ancestors: George Calvert (1579-1632), 1st Lord Baron Baltimore, a tenth great grandfather on my father's side.

Unbeknownst to me (or anyone else in my family), George Calvert's miniature (fig. 1) had been in a Baltimore museum, the Walters Art Museum, since 1938. Generations of my family had walked the halls of the Walters (my grandfather Tormey even exhibited several of his own paintings there) and yet no one had been aware that a perfect, life-like image of our Calvert patriarch lay locked in a vault just beyond our view. I myself only discovered it by chance, stumbling across photographs of the miniature while researching the genealogy of my Calvert ancestors.

When I first set sight on my tenth great grandfather's image, I was more than taken aback. George Calvert lived centuries before photography was invented; and yet, his portrait remains perfectly preserved in crisp, colorful detail that rivals any full color photograph of the modern age. I was shocked, too, upon realizing



Figure 1:

***Miniature Portrait of George Calvert (1579-1632),
1st Lord Baron Baltimore, in a Locket-Style
Frame with "Clam Shell" Opening to the Reverse***

by Peter Oliver

circa 1620

watercolor on vellum

1 15/16 x 2 11/16 inches

*a permanent holding of the Walters Art Museum,
Baltimore, Maryland*

photo courtesy Walters Art Museum

how small the image was – less than three inches tall and two inches wide. “How is it possible that someone could have painted such a small portrait with such perfect detail?!” I thought to myself at the time.

Equally surprising to me, Calvert’s portrait was displayed in a locket-style frame that, despite its exquisite, gem-quality features, was clearly intended to be held and interacted with. (At the time, I wasn’t yet familiar with the intimate nature of miniature portraits as personal possessions to be held or even worn as jewelry.)

This was my introduction to miniature portraiture. I had unwittingly stumbled upon the small art form; and I was instantly enamored and wanting to know more about miniature portraits as magnificent, historical treasures. I thus set out to study their origins and evolution; and it was in so doing that I discovered miniature portraits do not exist solely in museums. Indeed, some of the best examples of miniature portraits are owned by private collectors; and quality specimens at every price range come to market quite regularly.

Of course, newly enlightened, it wasn’t long before I had to have an antique miniature portrait of my own; and thus, I made my first purchase. No, it was not of the age or quality of George Calvert’s portrait; but it was a nice specimen, nonetheless – a portrait of an early American gentleman of the Federalist Era.

After that first purchase I learned that, at least for me, it is not easy to own just one antique miniature portrait. For me, one miniature quickly led to another, and that in turn led to yet another; and thus, a small collection was born.

Since those early acquisitions, as the collection has grown and as my knowledge has increased, my focus and goals for the collection have, likewise, evolved. Many initial purchases have been traded for higher quality specimens; and particular effort is now made to seek out miniatures that are either signed or definitively attributable to known artists. Effort is made, too, to seek out works by artists that are of interest from a research perspective (i.e., works by those artists about whom I am interested in conducting biographical research).



Figure 2:

Reverse of the miniature portrait of George Calvert

Depicted are Renaissance Era maidens, painted in enamel on porcelain and framed with gold.

The small clasp on the bottom edge opens the “clam shell” locket.

One factor that has remained constant with the collection from the beginning, however, is genealogical research. That is to say, when trying to learn more about an artist, in addition to researching his or her painting career, I also research his or her personal genealogy – as I believe that understanding the origins and background of an artist adds valuable perspective to how his or her art evolved over time. Thus, it can certainly be said that, just as genealogical research first led me to miniature portraits (i.e., my discovery of George Calvert’s miniature), genealogical research has continued to shape and color the Tormey-Holder collection over time.

Also adding shape and color the collection have been the insights and perspectives of my partner, James Holder, who joined me in building and managing our growing tribe of miniatures. Jim’s support has been instrumental in improving the overall quality of the collection; and for that I am grateful.

I am grateful, too, for inspiration I have received from the work of other serious collectors. Chief amongst them are Carmella Arturi and Roger Phillips, who have raised the bar and set new standards in the research of late nineteenth and early twentieth century miniaturists. I will consider myself successful if I can achieve but a fraction of the scholarly work they have published.



Left and center images are of the interior of the “clam shell” locket that houses George Calvert’s miniature portrait. The number 38.215 is a museum ascension number, inscribed by the Walters Art Museum in 1938. The far-right image is a side view of the locket when closed, revealing a detailed floral design painted in enamel.

