



GILBERT FORD BY JOHN SMART

"The glow of living flesh," says collector Richard Baron Cohen, is what draws him to the work of the 18th-century Georgian artist John Smart, long a favorite in the miniature world. Smart's market has exploded over the past few years, with several of his miniatures selling for upwards of \$50,000. At Sotheby's, Cohen claimed a 1¼-inch-high portrait of Gilbert Ford, attorney general of Jamaica, painted for his wife and signed and dated 1765, for £56,450 (\$90,000).

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SIR JOSHUA REYNOLDS BY WILLIAM GRIMALDI

What makes Cohen's heart beat faster when it comes to miniatures is the "precision, the hyperrealism."

This 1811 enamel miniature of the painter Sir Joshua Reynolds, which Cohen won for £12,500 (\$20,000), was modeled on a 1788 self-portrait and "fired a total of 23 times to achieve the rich and tenebrous quality of the original oil painting," according to the catalogue notes. It is inscribed to RH: the Prince. Regent.

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British Portrait Miniatures

The Philadelphia miniatures dealer Elle Shushan shares her expertise on these exquisite windows into the past.

Acquiring portrait miniatures is like buying pictures of other people's ancestors. After all, miniatures were never meant for public view. They were private portraits intended only for the eyes of the recipient. Even 400 years later, a certain sense of voyeurism is involved in admiring these intensely intimate images. To make the collecting category even more unlikely, the majority are less than three inches high. The bragging rights garnered by an impressive display are practically nonexistent.

Portrait miniatures evolved in the early 16th century from illuminated manuscripts. The first were painted on vellum or in oil on enamel or metal—gold, usually, for the nobility; silver or copper for lesser mortals. By the mid 18th century, the preference was for watercolor on ivory. The best examples were often set in gold and jeweled lockets with elaborate designs constructed of the sitter's hair on the reverse. Kings and queens commissioned them as gifts for visiting dignitaries or to reveal what they looked like to faraway royals, but they were also frequently created as memorials to loved ones who had died or to acquaint the groom of an arranged marriage with his wife-to-be.

What does it take to be a dedicated connoisseur of this rarefied specialty? One need look no further than Richard Baron Cohen, of New York, arguably the preeminent collector of British and European portrait miniatures. "I was used to spending a great deal of money on a small thing," says Cohen, who entered the miniatures market after forming many other collections,

including a celebrated one of topographical porcelain. He is careful to point out that he purchases only for love, never on speculation. "It is an instantaneous, visceral reaction. If I have to think, I don't buy," he says. Cohen points to a major aspect of miniatures' appeal: the sense of intimacy with the sitter that each evokes in the viewer. "I look at my objects as if they are real people," he says. "They are all alive. They all speak to me."

These characteristics were on full display in the auction *An Exceptional Eye: A Private British Collection*, held last July at Sotheby's London, which in addition to Old Masters, exquisite furniture, and studio pottery, included 30 miniatures described in the catalogue by James Stourton, chairman of Sotheby's U.K., as "astonishing." These wound up selling for from £4,000 (\$6,300) to £121,250 (\$194,000).

The top price was for a circa 1580 miniature of a noblewoman by Nicholas Hilliard, a goldsmith and portraitist to Queen Elizabeth I, and indeed examples painted by elite artists like Hilliard are the most coveted. However, personal interest often trumps elegance of execution among connoisseurs. A portrait of one of the fifth Duke of Devonshire's wives, the infamous Lady Elizabeth Foster, as well as representations of Catherine the Great and King Charles I, brought sums in the mid-five figures. Cohen acquired five miniatures from the auction, among them one of Gilbert Ford by John Smart, and a stunning 1811 rendition of the painter Sir Joshua Reynolds by William Grimaldi, both at left. ▣