

Precious Little Things: Miniatures at the Metropolitan Museum of Art

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Developed for Ken Soehner's Museums & Library Research course, Summer 2014.

The items.

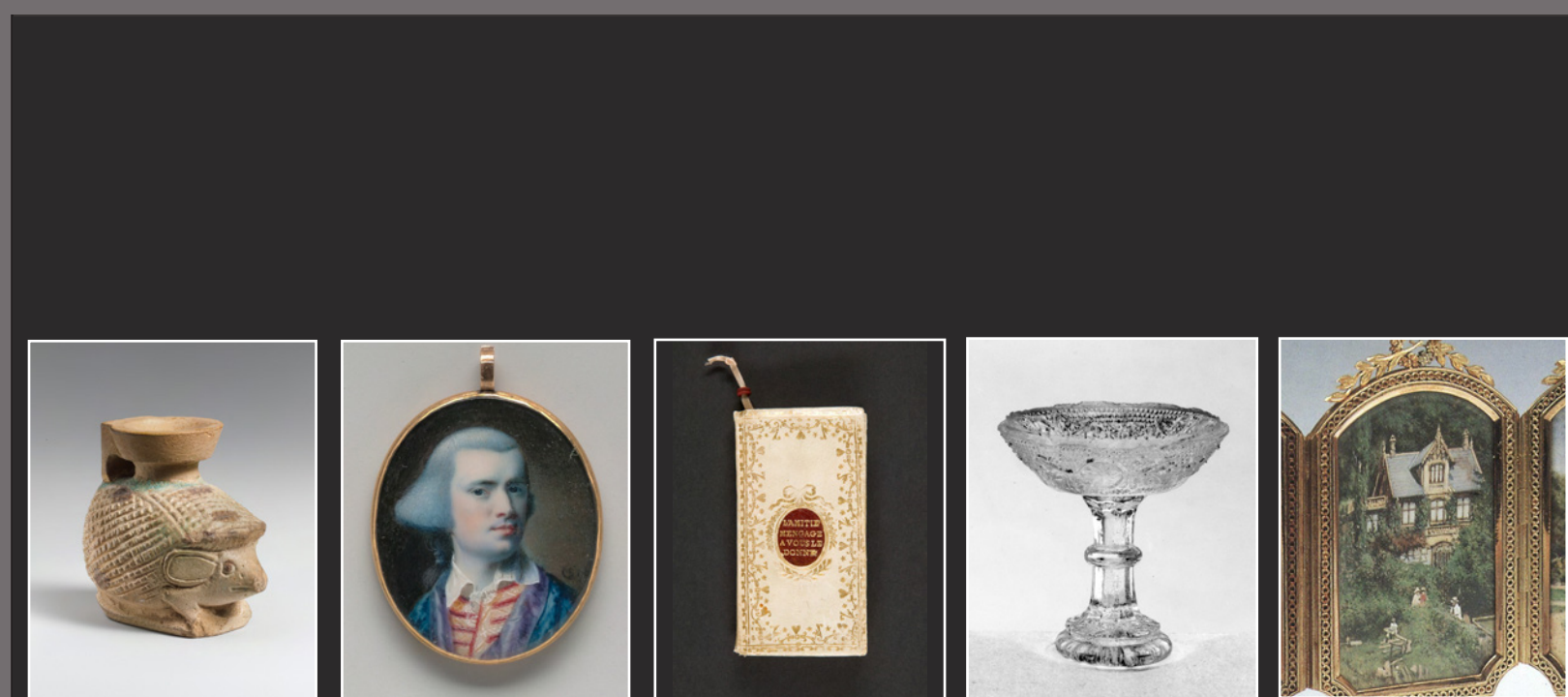


Top row (L-R): Faience aryballos (oil flask) in the form of a hedgehog, East Greek, 6th Century BCE; Hunchbacked figure, Olmec culture, 12th-9th Century BCE; Rosary bead, South Netherlandish, 1490-1525; *Almanach Royal, année bissextile M.DCC.LXXIV*, France, 1783; *Almanach de Normandie - pour l'année bisexte 1788*, France, 1788; Pochette (Kit), France, 1700-1799.

Center row (L-R): Self-portrait miniature, John Singleton Copley (1738-1815), 1769; *Elijah Boardman*, John Ramage (1748-1802), 1790; *A Mother's Pearls (Portraits of the Artist's Children)*, Thomas Seir Cummings (1804-1894), 1841; Miniature Compote, American, 1835-55; Miniature Pitcher, American, ca. 1835; *Danish Palaces Egg*, House of Carl Fabergé, 1890.

Bottom row (L-R): *Portrait of a Young Man, Probably Robert Deveraux (1566-1601)*, Second Earl of Essex, Nicholas Hilliard (ca. 1547-1619, 1588; *Lover's Eyes*, Artist Unknown (American), 1840; Miniature Bowl, ca. 1835; *Imperial Caucasus Egg*, House of Carl Fabergé, 1893; *Imperial Napoléonic Egg*, House of Carl Fabergé, 1912.

The catalog.



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(Cover image and all page spreads shown actual size.)

Introduction

The first steps toward this publication were taken as part of Ken Soehner's Museums & Library Research class in June 2014. Creating a cross-departmental exhibition with an overarching subject seemed easy enough: identify a theme ("The Neckline in Art"), "Musical Instruments in Art," "Fill-in-the-Blank in Art"), then construct an exhibition catalog. After some consideration, I decided to focus on miniatures, a decision which led to extensive research on terminology, before anything else.

The Oxford Art Online definition of "miniature" differs greatly from that in the *New Oxford American Dictionary*. The word has its origins in medieval Latin, from *minium* ("red lead, vermilion"), which reflects the use of red pigment to highlight illuminated manuscripts. Miniature in art, then, largely applies to "paintings in manuscript" and only secondarily to "the related form of independent, small paintings, particularly portraits, that developed in the 16th century." Miniature, insofar as it has come to be understood in common parlance, however, indicates that a thing is simply "much smaller than normal" or even a "small replica or model." Smeeyers and Reynolds go so far as to denounce the latter definition as misguided: "the result of a mistaken etymology, which associated the word with 'minute.'" In the end, the "proper" definition was no matter—what I really wanted to know was if snail boxes, necklaces, and tromp l'oeil paintings were considered "miniatures," or if they were simply small, and I was satisfied with the secondary meaning.

Because I am interested in the talismans, good luck charms, totems, and sentimental souvenirs that people carry in their pockets every day, this exhibition focuses on miniature (i.e., small) things of a devotional nature, from the overtly religious to the treasured personal mementos. The exhibition examines the handheld precious object over centuries, from the Greek Archaic period to the late nineteenth century and across cultures from polytheistic Central America to Orthodox Imperial Russia. Items for this exhibition were selected from the following departments:

American Paintings and Sculpture • American Decorative Arts • Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas • European Sculpture and Decorative Arts • Greek & Roman • Medieval Art • Musical Instruments • Thomas J. Watson Library

Surveying items of such an intimate nature has its complications: in his review of the National September 11 Memorial Museum, Holland Cotter noted that displaying such objects can render a museum-going experience "at once theatrical, voyeuristic, and devotional."¹ This exhibition catalog aims to celebrate the things we give to one another, and the things we choose to hold close—the precious little things.

—DHD, July 2014.

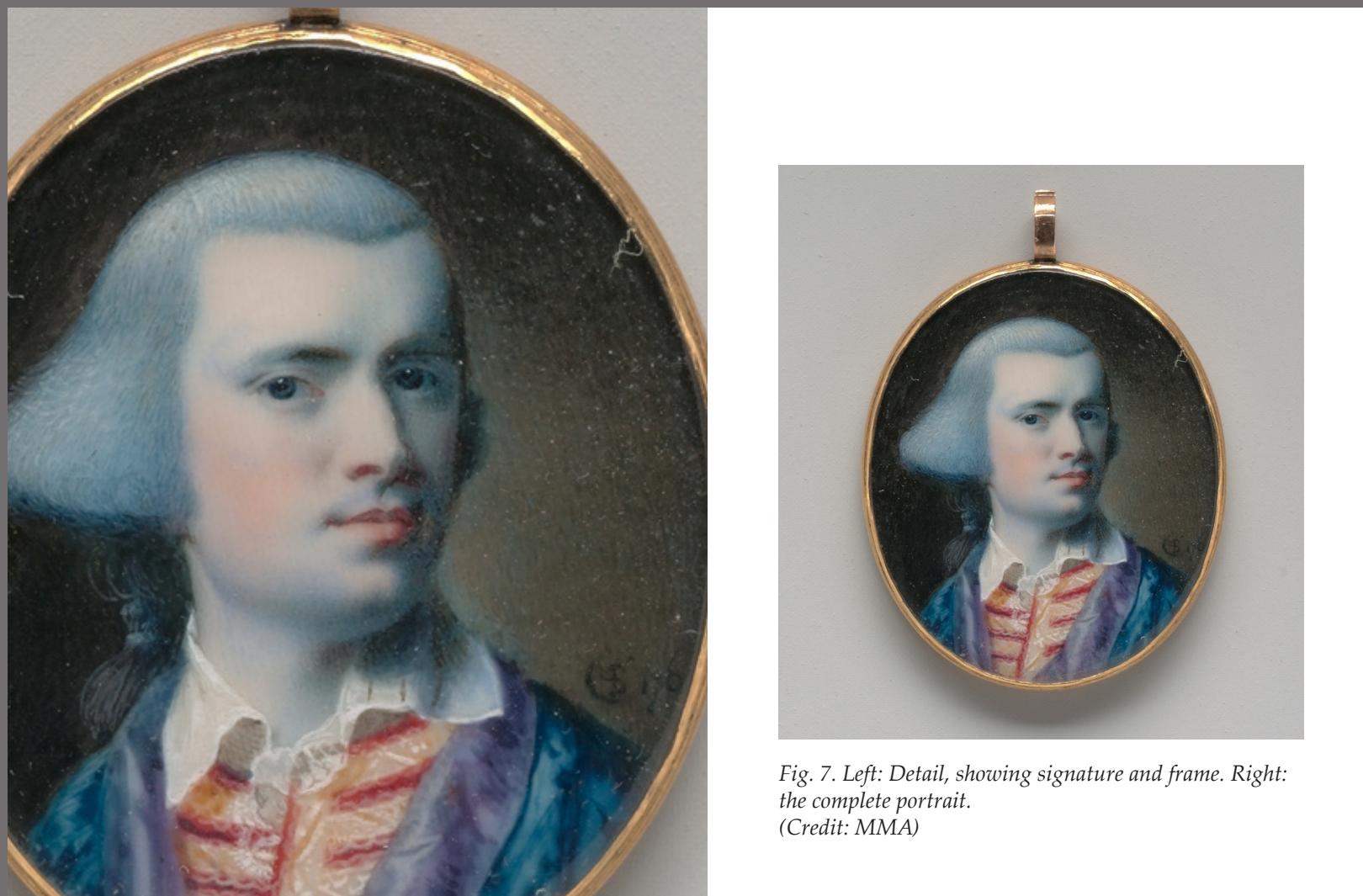


Fig. 7: Left: Detail, showing signature and frame. Right: the complete portrait. (Credit: MMA)



Fig. 8: Left: Detail, showing texture of portrait. Right: the complete portrait. (Credit: MMA)

Self-portrait miniature John Singleton Copley (American, Boston, Massachusetts 1738–1815 [London])

Date: 1769
Medium: Watercolor on ivory
Dimensions: 1.38 x 1.18 in. (3.3 x 2.7 cm)
Classification: Paintings
Credit Line: Purchase, Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, by exchange, Anonymous Gift, and Virginia Marvin Stoughton Bequest, 2006
Accession Number: 2006.23.32

Small painting, signed and dated lower right, 15 x 1769. Case-work: gold with burnished bezel, likely made by Paul Revere. Replacement crystal. Recto of object bears label fom Yale Art Gallery as well as MMA Accession Number.
Condition and Provenance: Object is in excellent condition. Provenance: John Singleton Copley; his daughter, Mrs. Gardiner Greene; Boston; her grandson, the Rev. John Singleton Copley Greene, Sr.; Boston; his daughter, Mary Amory Copley Greene; Boston; her nephew, Henry Copley Greene, Cambridge; his daughter, Katharine Rosalind Copley Greene, New York; her sister, Mrs. Gordon Sweet (on loan to the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 1971-72, and to Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, 1972-78); Hirsch & Adler Galleries, New York, 1979; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 2006.

Elijah Boardman
John Ramage (Ireland ca. 1748-1802 [Montreal])

Date: ca. 1790
Medium: Watercolor on ivory
Dimensions: Overall: 17.5 in (44.5 cm)
Classification: Paintings, Jewelry
Credit Line: Gift Mrs. Richard B. Harborsome & Miss Fanny S. Cummings, 1928
Accession Number: 1928.148.1

A necklace of eight vermeil plectrums joined with gold-plated brass chains. Replacement crystals (7) on each portrait.
Object is in excellent condition. Provenance: Thomas Seir Cummings to Jane (Cook) Cummings, his wife; by descent in the family to Mrs. Richard B. Harborsome and Miss Fanny S. Cummings, daughters of the artist and original recipient.

The project.

Students were invited to explore the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and envision themselves as museum curators. The final project asked students to define a common theme, select twelve items that fell within that theme, research the items, and create an exhibition catalog for the items, providing descriptions and photographs for each object. My selected theme, miniatures within the Museum's collection, was examined via items that spanned several centuries of art history and numerous different media.

Two-fifths of my catalog consisted of American art, but my exhibition spanned centuries, museum departments, and geographic regions. I incorporated items from Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas (AOA) in the pre-Columbian period, Greek and Roman, the departments of Musical Instruments, Medieval art, and from the Thomas J. Watson Library. My final product comprised descriptions for twelve items—a Greek aryballos faience vase in the shape of a hedgehog, a hunchback figure from the Olmec culture, a wood rosary bead, a miniature "pocket" violin, two 32mo fine bindings from France ca. 1784, three American portrait miniatures, two pieces of miniature glass, and a metalwork miniature by the House of Carl Fabergé. The catalog was fifty-one pages long, cited 150 references, and each source was annotated with further information about the publication. Because of my extensive research, the catalog also included brief descriptions for five additional items and twenty-five additional sources in a secondary bibliography.



Fig. 2.

Hunchbacked Figure

Date: 12th-9th century BCE
Geography: Mexico, Mesoamerica
Culture: Olmec
Medium: Ceramic, pigment
Dimensions: H: 2.65 x W: 2.25 in. (6.7 x 5.7 cm)
Classification: Ceramics-Sculpture
Credit Line: Gift of Carolyn C. and Dan C. Williams, 1989
Accession Number: 1989.392

A nude figure, sitting cross-legged with left hand in front of left knee and right hand on right thigh. This solid hand-modeled²⁴ miniature is composed of fine-paste, cream-colored clay.²⁵ Facial features and symbols on the body are rendered in red and black pigments that were likely applied after firing.

Condition and provenance: The surface of this object is well burnished²⁶ and bears no evidence of damage. Believed to be part of a trio of hunchback figures from the same site (probably Las Bocas in central Mexico).²⁷ This figure was donated to the Museum by Carolyn C. and Dan C. Williams in 1989.²⁸

The Olmec (from Nahuatl, *Olmēcah*, "rubber lineage" or "rubber people") were a civilization in Mexico that flourished during the Formative period, from ca. 1300 BCE to 400 BCE.²⁹ Better known for their "colossal heads"—monumental basalt³⁰ likenesses of human heads, first discovered in the nineteenth century—and stelae, Historian Christopher A. Pool³¹ considered the Olmec to be Mesoamerica's first true civilization.

Scholarship is scant on the prevalence and use of miniature hunchbacked figures, but the naturalistically rendered face³² corresponds with the overall realism³³ found in Olmec figurines. Heidi King noted that many Precolumbian hunchback figures were found in burials, and postulated that this particular figure probably came from the site of Las Bocas in Central Mexico³⁴, where many excavated tombs contained great quantities of ceramic figures and vessels.³⁵ After José Melgar y Serrano reported the discovery of the first *in situ* Olmec monument in 1869³⁶, widespread looting at regional burial sites subsequently rendered provenance for such objects inexact.

In Franz Feuchtwanger's seminal *Cerámica Olmeca*³⁷ and in publications by the Metropolitan Museum of Art,³⁸ the authors observed that hunchbacked people held positions of importance in ancient Mesoamerica, and theorized that this particular figure may have belonged to a ruler or one who wanted the associated powers of a hunchback held close at hand. In Olmec culture, individuals with physical anomalies were thought to have access to the supernatural realm and possess special abilities due to their deformations.³⁹

David C. Grove states that small, portable objects saw a rise in production during the middle Formative period, when they were distributed by an emerging elite class,⁴⁰ an observation that lends credence to the arguments put forth in the aforementioned publications.

Several authors have written extensively on Olmec colossal heads, infant figures, stelae, masks, written language, social organization, and ritual sacrifice.⁴¹⁻⁴³ but further investigation is warranted to determine the true purpose and historical use of this object.

Fig. 2: Detail (recto) and overall view (verso), of Hunchbacked Figure. (Credit: MMA)

Miniature Fine Bindings

In 2009, Metropolitan Museum of Art Trustee Emeritus Mrs. Jayne Wrightman donated sixty-five⁴⁴ fine bindings to the Thomas J. Watson Library. Included in this gift were a number of miniature books. Published in Paris between 1772 and 1820, these luxury volumes showcase a variety of materials and designs common to the era, from embellished embroidered silk to gold-tooled leather. The books' themes of travel, ballooning, and wordplay reflect popular cultural pursuits in pre-to Post-Revolutionary France. Two volumes from this group are described in more detail below.

Since early typeset books were oversized (Gutenberg's *Bible* measured 11 x 15 in.)⁴⁵, many early attempts at miniaturization are almost "normal size" by present-day standards.⁴⁶ With sizing determined by the size of sheet that an early paper-maker could conveniently turn out with a manual press,⁴⁷ miniature books commonly fall into two designations: 32mo (the selected books described herein) and 64mo (the smallest, representing a piece of paper that could be folded into sixty-four sections).⁴⁸ Miniature books thrived as more readers also became long-distance-travelers and desired "travel libraries" that economized on space: in the seventeenth century, pockets began to appear in coats for the first time, and in the eighteenth century alone, over six hundred and fifty miniature titles are known to have been issued.⁴⁹ Indeed, McCormick goes so far as to declare that the "golden age of miniature printing"⁵⁰ was from 1775-1825.

In 1783, brothers Joseph-Michel and Jacques-Étienne Montgolfier made history with the debut of the *globe aérostatique*, or hot air balloon.⁵¹ After the device's first manned flight and subsequent public exhibitions, and as the French nobility clamored for more information on balloons and ballooning, illustrations of the Montgolfiers' contraption became ubiquitous in publishing.⁵² A title in this collection, *L'amour dans le globe*, celebrates the brothers, the development of their lighter-than-air device, and includes folding engravings that depict the progression from early tests to more fantastic demonstrations before Louis XVI at Versailles⁵³ as well as praise for the Montgolfiers from Benjamin Franklin, who had learned of their invention while in Paris to sign the eponymous Treaty that formally ended the American Revolutionary War.⁵⁴

Almanach Royal is another of four titles donated by Mrs. Wrightman that reflect the extent of the hot air balloon's popularity in the immediate wake of its introduction,⁵⁵ but the book's distinctive cover depicts neither the Montgolfiers nor their famous balloon. The two individuals depicted inside the gilt balloon stamp on the front cover of *Almanach Royal* are Jacques Alexandre-César Charles (1746-1823) and Marie-Noël Robert (1740-1820)—collaborators on the world's first hydrogen balloon, the *charlier*, which debuted on the Champs de Mars in Paris two months after the Montgolfier Brothers' premiere.⁵⁶

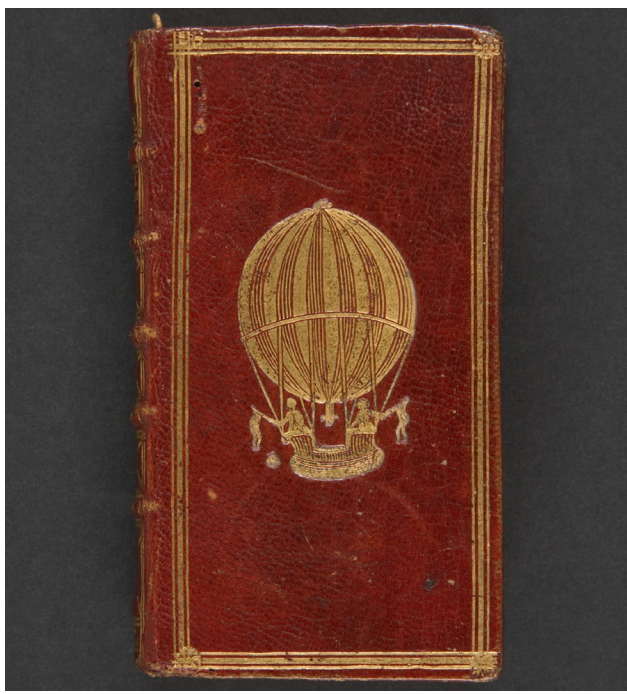


Fig. 4: Left and above: Detail, front cover. (Credit: MMA)



Fig. 6.

Pochette (Kit)

Date: ca. 1700-1799
Geography: France
Medium: Maple, ivory, ebony
Dimensions: Overall: 41.9cm (16 1/2in.)
Classification: Chordophone-Lute-bowed-unfretted
Credit Line: The Crosby Brown Collection of Musical Instruments, 1889
Accession Number: 89.4.290

Small violin made of wood and ivory with gut strings. F sound-holes. Peg-box features carved wooden pegs and terminates in a flat scroll with an ivory shield decoration. Boat-shaped body with light yellow varnish. Front edged with ebony and ivory inlay. Four gut strings. Finger-board and tailpiece inlaid with ebony and ivory. Carved wood back features center medallion illustrating a scene of humans in a pastoral setting. Some traces of paint on verso.

Condition and Provenance: Object is fine condition. Donated to the Museum as part of the initial gift from Mrs. Crosby Brown (Mary Elizabeth Adams, 1842-1918), in 1889.⁵⁷ This donation, of 266 pieces,⁵⁸ marked the beginning of the Musical Instruments Department.

Called kits in English⁵⁹, the *pochete* (French, "small pocket" or "small fiddle"), or *violino* (Italian, "mute"), was a pocket-size violin widely used in Europe by dance masters during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.⁶⁰ Long-time conservator⁶¹ of musical instruments at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Stewart Pollens notes that French

theologian and music theorist Marin Mersenne referred to the instrument as *la Poché* ("the pocket") in his pioneering work on instruments and acoustics, *Harmonie Universelle*.⁶² As the Italian term suggests, pochettes produce a muted sound.⁶³

Reit notes that dance masters— itinerant dancing teachers—were hired to come to the homes of the wealthy to teach children to dance,⁶⁴ and required a small instrument that would not only travel easily could also be accommodated into a pocket when not being played.⁶⁵ Pochettes are physically similar to the rebe, carved from a single piece of wood,⁶⁶ and were often made of exotic woods, ivory, or tortoiseshell with elaborate head and back carvings.⁶⁷

Leading instrument craftsmen Antonio Stradivari, Nicolo Gagliano, David Teichler, Carlo Bergonzi, and Joseph Guarneri⁶⁸ manufactured pochettes. This charming item is a fine example of the "boat-shaped" (*pochette en bateau*)⁶⁹ instrument: twelve pochettes from the Museum's holdings were exhibited in *The Dance Master's Kit* in 1982.⁷⁰

As the story goes, Mrs. Crosby Brown fell in love with an Italian instrument (the *pandurina*), and a landmark collection began to form.⁷¹ As her hobby outgrew her capacity to store the items on her own property,⁷² Mrs. Brown donated her instruments to the Museum, with one key provision: that she and her son, Williams Adams Brown, could retain limited control to add to and replace items at will, in perpetuity. At the time of her death, Mrs. Brown's namesake collection numbered over 3600 instruments.⁷³

Fig. 6: Detail, recto, and verso of object. (Credit: MMA)



Fig. 10: Left: Detail, pressed glass. (Image by author.) Right: the object. (Credit: MMA)



Fig. 11: Left: Detail, pressed glass, showing air bubbles. (Image by author.) Right: the object. (Credit: MMA)

American Lacy Pressed Glass Miniatures

For centuries, glass was produced in the same way: individual trained artisans spent hours, finely crafting glass to the perfect shape, color, and consistency, blowing air into the malleable liquid form. Early attempts to establish glass factories in the colonies failed and it was not until the 1760s that Americans could purchase glass tableware made in this country.⁷⁴ In England, manufacturers began advertising all manner of miniature glass toys in 1785,⁷⁵ but this kind of production would not be possible in North America for several decades.

In 1825, the mechanical press was invented, enabling glass to be produced at a faster speed, in higher quantities, and by fewer, lesser-skilled workers.⁷⁶ Pressed glass is characterized by a smooth surface (made by the plunger) opposite the patterned surface (made by the mold).⁷⁷ At once, glass tableware was available to the middle class, and glass "toys" became popular soon thereafter.⁷⁸

Because of the proliferation of patents for similar devices at the time, it is unclear as to who exactly invented the press, but Van Tassel contended that "Regardless of the inventor, it was [Denning] Jarves who first saw the possibilities of the glass press," and added that by "1850... mass production of pressed glass was well underway."⁷⁹
Denning Jarves was responsible for a great deal of beautiful glass prized by modern collectors. In 1825 he founded the Boston and Sandwich Glass Company (B&S) on Cape Cod. Although B&S manufactured blown, cut, and small pieces of pressed glass—usually small objects like salts, knobs, and shallow dishes—the idea of pressing articles larger than salts was in Jarves' mind.⁸⁰ Consequently, Jarves patented many improvements, and his factory produced greater and greater quantities of it,⁸¹ so much that eventually "sandwich glass" became synonymous with pressed glass in some antiquing circles. Boston and Sandwich Glass Company had sixty-three years of operation.

It is unknown whether or not Jarves obtained the idea for what would become called "lacy pressed glass" from the French, or vice-versa.⁸² Noted Rosson and Fendelman⁸³ The term "lacy" refers to a large group of (Boston and Sandwich glass items that are distinguished by small raised dots in the background called "stippling." ... The overall effect is said to be 'lacy,' and though this kind of glass was made at Sandwich, it was also made in Europe—particularly France—and in various American Midwest-east glass houses.⁸⁴ Though it was easy to create forgeries of pressed glass, researchers have spent years and years digging at Sandwich recovering broken pieces so that they can determine with some accuracy what was made there and what was not.⁸⁵
Ruth Webb Lee, who wrote no less than three books on Sandwich glass, concluded that all miniature glass pieces were made

American Lacy Pressed Glass Miniatures

by Sandwich: "So few of them are to be found compared with adult pieces that it is doubtful whether any other factory ventured in this field."⁸⁶ Moreover, she elucidates:

"According to an old tradition of the trade which is still current, the toy pieces were really salesmen's samples. The drummers found it possible to sell the larger dishes by showing the toy pieces which were so much easier to carry about than full-size samples which not only would break too easily but were bulky. ... Unfortunately, it is a matter of record that the Boston & Sandwich Glass Company employed no drummers at the time, and, moreover, none of the toy pieces is of a design that corresponds with the designs of any of the larger dishes."⁸⁷

Miniature lacy pressed glass pieces are prized by collectors, and the Museum's collection is unique, in that it holds several examples of different patterns, including a superb miniature saltcellar, complete with lid, in yellow pressed glass. Probably the rarest of the miniature pieces are the compotes (Fig. 10).⁸⁸

Donor Emily Winthrop Miles was born in New York City in 1893, an eleventh-generation descendant of Massachusetts Bay Colony founder, John Winthrop. She was raised in New York and Lenox, Massachusetts, and studied sculpture under Daniel Chester French. Rather scandalously, she eloped in 1924, and married her one and only husband—her parents' chauffeur, Corey Lucian Miles.⁸⁹

A prolific sculptress, several of Mrs. Miles' works are now in the collections of Harvard University,⁹⁰ the City University of New York, and several small art museums. Supposedly encouraged to collect by her father, Mrs. Miles focused on glass and was particularly attracted to the neoclassical designs in Wedgwood ceramics.⁹¹ Her Wedgwood collection was donated to the Brooklyn Museum; her assemblage of 600 pieces of nineteenth-century American glass came to the Met in 1946,⁹² and all of the Luce glass miniatures in the department of American Decorative Arts are from this gift. When the items debuted as part of the Luce Center Visible Storage in 1998, Times columnist Paula Dietz noted that Miles' collection was affectionately "referred to as the Met as miles and miles of glass."⁹³

Upon her death in 1962, Miles' 740-acre⁹⁴ Connecticut estate, Neverland, was bequeathed to the National Audubon Society;⁹⁵ now approximately 5,000 acres,⁹⁶ it serves as the Emily Winthrop Miles Wildlife Sanctuary.

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