

Paint with the Professionals

Everything tiny to hand

Painting in miniature is much more than just using a tiny brush. Tracy Hall shares some tips on how you can explore small worlds – but don't forget the magnifying glass. Words: LC Littlejohn



Tracy Hall builds up each miniature painting by bringing in all the elements she wants bit by bit. The arrangements of flora and fauna are made using innumerable drawings until she is happy with the overall appearance. In the case of *Blackbirds in the Clematis*, below, she wants a dark area for the female in which to hide, and light in the foreground for the feisty male. But these sketches are always formulated in the size she wants for the final picture, so she is working in miniature from the start.

Once she is satisfied that all has come together, only then does she draw on the board. On her tiny easel she inserts a small piece of watercolour board she obtains from America. This surface is excellent for drawing on and even takes rubbings out with no trace left on the surface. "But you must draw gently," she adds.

She uses a very sharp pencil and handmade Kolinsky sable brushes sizes 0, 3/0, and 10/0. "I've tried others but I find these are the best. Brushes with just two or three hairs are no use. They must hold a decent amount of paint yet have a very fine point. You don't get a lot of paintings out of these Kolinsky brushes, but they are the best work with for the finest details."

She sits very straight in her chair and brings the board on the easel up to eye level. She holds a good-quality magnifying glass in her hand at all times. "My sight is very good, but I did notice that my eyes were getting sore, so my optician gave me reading glasses that ease the strain of working in miniature. I also stop every now and then and focus on something in the distance."

Frames are also important, and these are sourced from a specialist in the UK. "They must be well made so that all holds together firmly at the small, narrow joints. After all, the frame is the final touch." ■

LEFT *Blackbirds in the Clematis*, watercolour on HP board, 8.9x5.1cm



Society focus

The Royal Miniature Society

They may be no bigger than a thumbnail but half a million brushstrokes can go into a single tiny masterpiece. Clare Buttery delves into the patient and precise world of miniature painting

To think that the allowed maximum size for a Royal Miniature Society (RMS) painting is four-and-a-half by six inches and that many come much smaller is almost inconceivable. Other than exceptionally fine brushes, a smooth surface on which to paint and a magnifying glass, what makes painting on this scale possible is an extraordinary amount of self-discipline, dedication and skill. "Without doubt," says Elizabeth Meek, president of the RMS, in her essay on the history and appreciation of the society, "miniature painting is the most unforgiving of art skills. One piece of work could involve half a million brushstrokes."

Though now generally known as the RMS, the society is still officially and deliberately long-windedly referred to as The Royal Society of Miniature Painters, Sculptors and Gravers. The abbreviated version aims to keep up with the times, while the original better depicts its attitude and principles, described by Meek as "infinite patience, precise composition and an extreme delicacy of touch."

HRH The Prince of Wales is the society's current patron and historically, miniature artists like Nicholas Hilliard enjoyed a prestigious position in the royal court, where miniature portraits were commissioned



"We want to see future paintings still using the traditional techniques but in a contemporary way"

ABOVE Alan Thomas, Joy Stanley Ricketts, oil on ivory, 5x7.5cm
BELOW Jerry Brooks RMS at last year's RMS Exhibition



as photographs might be today. With the advent of photography the role of miniaturists receded and it has been the aim of the RMS, since its inception in 1895, to maintain the traditions, techniques and standards of miniature art.

It does this through the most stringent regulations. To have a chance to be elected as an associate member one must submit, and have accepted, five pieces of work for the annual exhibition in two consecutive years. At that point, success is still not guaranteed as there are strictly limited numbers of memberships. In 2008, the number of full members totalled just 92.

"We've had people who have submitted and exhibited work for many years and not actually achieved membership," says Alison Griffin, vice-president of the RMS and a miniaturist herself. "The tradition has always been that memberships are limited – it is more of a status than anything else."

"We want to keep miniatures alive. A lot of our artists are still maintaining the skills that Hilliard and Holbein were painting with, but we're also trying to develop miniature art – we want to make progress and see future paintings still using the traditional techniques but in a more contemporary way. Some of our artists are coming in now with new ideas but still using beautiful old techniques. And we are getting more young people, which is terrific."

The good news is that the miniature art market seems to be thriving, with commissions growing in abundance. It should not come as a surprise: humans have long enjoyed a fascination with the miniature – the quality is easy to appreciate, and they are affordable. The exhibitions of 2007 and 2008 proved the most successful since the society was founded in 1895. Unsurprisingly then, the RMS is looking forward to its next annual exhibition in October.

The RMS 115th Annual Exhibition of Miniature Art runs at the Mall Galleries, London, SW1, 13-25 October. (020) 7930 6844; www.royal-miniature-society.org.uk