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Enamel, copper, sterling silver

4 x 3 1/8 x 1/2 in.

Collection of the Enamel Arts Foundation

The Intimate Vision of the Late 18th Century Eye Miniatures

By Barbara McFadyen

The Eye Miniatures of the late 18th century comprise a unique subgenre of mourning and sentimental jewelry in the Georgian era, spanning the years of 1770-1830. Straddling miniature painting and portrait art, this short-lived rage faded into oblivion in the early 19th century. These unique portraits of a single eye imbued with an air of secrecy are now collectively referred to as "Lover's Eyes" yet they were not limited to those exchanged between lovers. They also served as portraits of remembrance to commemorate friendships, family members and those loved and lost. By looking back at their viewer, the eye portraits created a reciprocal mode of viewing called intimate vision, which brings the gaze of another into the heart of private experience. A symbolic sentimental language was hidden by means of gemstones and imagery, within these exquisite miniatures and their elaborate settings.

It all began with a forbidden romance, on a fateful evening at the Opera in 1784, when the Prince of Wales fell in love at first sight of the beautiful commoner, Maria Fitzherbert. Soon after, the smitten 21-year-old Prince declared his wish to marry her. The Royal Marriage Act however, stipulated that Prince could not be married without his father, the King's, consent until the age of 25. It was unlikely King George III would approve the twice widowed Catholic Maria.

The Prince secretly proposed marriage to Maria November 3rd, 1785 in his famed letter with the postscript that read, "P.S. I send you a Parcel. . .and I send you at the same time an Eye, if you have not totally forgotten the whole countenance, I think the likeness will strike you". In



Figure 1
place of a wedding ring, Prince George sent a miniature of his own eye painted by his close

friend and much celebrated court miniaturist, Richard Cosway (fig.1).

Moved by the prince's proposal and perhaps the intimate gaze of his eye miniature, Mrs. Fitzherbert accepted. They were married in a secret ceremony on December 15th, 1785. Shortly after their clandestine wedding, Mrs. Fitzherbert commissioned Cosway, to paint her own eye for the prince as a birthday gift. It was this romantic exchange of eye portraits that set off a trend among nobility that gradually spread across Europe, reaching a peak in the first decade of the 19th century. These intimate tokens of love have become known today as Lover's Eyes, a genre largely overlooked by scholars. There remain fewer than 1,000 in existence today.

As one of the oldest and most powerful symbols used by man, the eye has long been considered the *window of the soul*, revealing and concealing one's deepest thoughts and emotions. Eye miniatures endeavored to capture this *window of the soul* and reflection of a person's most intimate thoughts and feelings. Sharing in the same economy of gift giving as sentimental jewelry, these eye portraits were exchanged not only between lovers, but families and friends. A gift that was almost always meant to remain secret, the eye painting was designed to be recognizable only to the recipient. Enveloped with an air of mystery and anonymity, the gaze of the eyes was to be treasured in solitude. In some cases, the eye miniature was also intended to act as a vehicle of protection watching over the recipient and served as a source of comfort or reassurance when the beloved was not near. The 18th century was a visual culture obsessed with seeing, being seen and seeing without being seen. As a highly intensified portrait miniature, painted eyes also participated in these games of looking. In the portrayal of the gaze, the eye is **always returning the gaze** it gets and becomes **both receiver and transmitter**, creating a unique reversal of subject-object position.

Eye miniatures were rendered in watercolor on ivory and vellum, or gouache on card depending on

the financial means of the buyer. Covered in glass for protection and always painted in miniature, eye portraits ranged in size from a half to a centimeter or two. The only details included were of the surrounding face,



Figure 2

eyelashes and brow, a wisp of hair, or the bridge of a nose...hinting at but not revealing the individual's true identity. These miniature gifts were given among the royalty in court or those of the upper classes that could afford them. Set in decorative frames of gold and encrusted with pearls, diamonds and other precious stones these tiny paintings were transformed into jewels. The striking imbalance between the lavish style of the elaborate frame and the eye's simple content is arresting and the rich details compensate for the simplicity of the eye's representation (fig.2).

The settings for eye miniatures encompass an astonishing array of decorative and functional objects, from simple lockets and lavish rings, brooches and pendants to snuff boxes, toothpick cases, and watch fobs. Those carried on one's person in the form of a small box, held trinkets, toothpicks, or even faux beauty marks called patches. The majority of "lover's eyes" however, were designed and worn as jewelry, in the form of pendants, rings and brooches. The wearing of eye miniatures was strictly gendered. It was acceptable for women to display portraits on their bodies; however, men would risk a perceived loss of masculinity if they were to do so. Generally, men wore eye miniatures under their lapels or inside their coats.

Eye miniatures are rooted in an 18/h-19/h century code of chivalry in which symbols of gems and flowers held special meanings. The Victorians

delighted in the practice of *floriography*, and also valued the *language of gemstones*, utilizing jewelry to

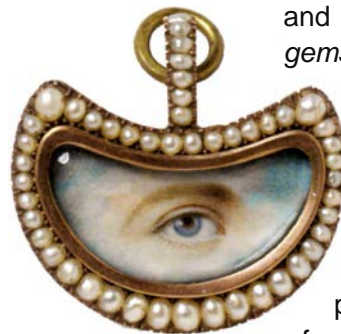


Figure 3

communicate the feelings and attributes of the beloved in a unique form of sentimental discourse. Pearls, a particular favorite, were found in abundance in lover's eye jewelry. Through their

chaste and perfect roundness, they have been thought to express purity and love. There is also a strong link between pearls and tears, through their close connection with the sea. In some eye miniatures, tears are suggested not only by the pearl surrounds, but also by the drop-like shape of their settings (fig.3).

Diamonds were found in the most costly and exquisitely crafted settings due to their value and rarity, for patrons with exceptional means. A brilliant example is this gold ring (fig.4) crested with a diamond coronet, which is attributed to Thomas Richmond the Elder who studied briefly under George Engleheart.



Figure 4

This eye miniature alludes to a double symbolic meaning; the earl's coronet indicates the noble identity of the sitter, whereas the heart shape denotes love and the crown signifies fidelity. Over the centuries, the diamond's immutability has made it a symbol of strength and constancy, suitable to the loving sentiment of such a gift.

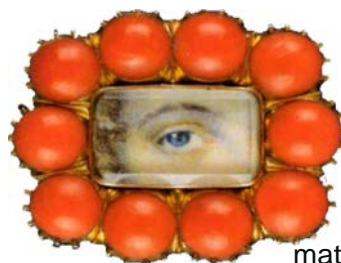


Figure 5

Coral, although less precious than pearls, was very popular in jewelry of the Georgian Era.

It had the distinction of being the only natural material that was equally at home for day (undress),

late afternoon (half dress), or for evening (full dress). Considered the pearl's companion, coral was at the same time, its opposite. Also coming

from the sea, its deep vermillion color was a stark contrast to the creamy white of the pearl. As a material with a longstanding history of special powers, coral was believed to protect the wearer from peril by its strong color repelling misfortune and harm (fig.5). Long credited with having the power to ward off the evil eye, coral was used in the 19th century for its amuletic power in the form of children's coral bead necklaces or coral branches attached to baby's rattles.

The most desirable gemstone of all in Georgian jewelry was the garnet. Flat cut garnet jewelry was in high demand in the eighteenth century as it was affordable and considered to be attractive on almost every complexion. The most popular trait associated with the garnet was *true* friendship, felicity and constancy. An eye miniature would have been given to a dear friend or confidant as a symbol of amity.

Like coral, turquoise was also thought to have a talismanic effect and believed to "strengthen the sight and spirits of its wearer", protecting one from infection. Turquoise was reputed to go pale when its wearer sickened and to lose its color completely on death, or to recover color when worn by a healthy owner. When turquoise cracked it was thought it spared the owner from a broken bone. Prized for its unique and beautiful color, turquoise was used sparingly in late Georgian jewelry due to its scarcity and high value. Owing to this rarity, turquoise came to signify success and *true riches* (fig.6).



Figure 6

a profusion of gifts among the royalty, which in turn set off a fashion that eventually spread to the middle classes (fig.7).



Figure 8

In the early nineteenth century, eye miniatures evolved into a form of memorial jewelry.

The focus of the eye was a remembrance often confirmed by the presence of an inscription, or suggested by swirling clouds and

and blue sky, signifying a beloved's passage into heaven and the hereafter. Of

these many lover's eyes that served a memorial function, only *some* can be classified as true mourning jewelry; constituted by those worn during a prescribed period of grieving. Georgians were expected to go into full mourning and wear only black after the death of a family member or loved one and activities were severely limited. The mourning codes during the Victorian period were even more stringent, especially after the death of Prince Albert. After a suitable period of time the bereaved would enter half mourning, when the somber colors of lavender and grey were introduced, until the appropriate amount of time passed and life resumed with all its colors. The majority of mourning jewelry was black and made of onyx, Whitby jet, French jet and black enamel. Eye miniatures that included the use of black enamel in their settings can be confidently identified as mourning pieces (fig.8).

Some of the most powerful and emotionally evocative eye miniatures are those of the "Crying Eye", which



Figure 9

emerged as yet another form of romantic gift. During this age of sentimentality, the rhetoric of tears represented the most natural gift that only the body could give. It was generally assumed that language failed when met with strong emotion, and crying was conceived of as a sense being superior to words. The crying eye, also referred to as *tear jewelry*, appears to be silently weeping via crystals (or diamonds) attached to the ivory as teardrops materializing expressions of grief (fig.13). These teardrops add an expressive, emotional and touching dimension to the immobile stare of the eye miniatures, implying a connection between



Figure 7

Enamel was out of favor for a good part of the 18th century, until the talented London enamelist, Jusen, perfected a distinctly English style of enameling in 1775. This introduced into the world of

eye miniatures a smooth, dark, translucent midnight blue in opulent settings coupled with pearls and precious stones. This remarkable and extremely popular color began as

weeping via crystals (or diamonds) attached to the ivory as teardrops materializing expressions of grief (fig.9). These teardrops add an expressive, emotional and touching dimension to the immobile stare of the eye miniatures, implying a connection between seeing and weeping. Tear jewelry created a unique paradox within the genre of eye miniatures for not only did the crying eye complement the sorrow of the bereaved, but it was also viewed as expressing grief on its own behalf. Crying over its own loss, the eye becomes a continued, ceaseless source of sadness far more than just a remembrance or remedy for grief. (fig.9). For the most part, the crying eye miniatures were a means to relieve the wearer of their obligation to grieve endlessly. When incorporated into a brooch and worn outwardly for all those around to see, the crying eye became a marker of grief and public evidence that the deceased was being mourned. No matter how they are viewed, these beautiful mementos created a comforting reciprocity by keeping the gaze of the departed or loved one constantly present and infinitely watching (fig.10).



Figure 10

Through the study of eye miniatures, we glimpse a particular aspect of history that opens a 'window' on the history of vision. Rather than simply 'looking and seeing', they show us a mode of 'being seen' in a pre-photographic era. More than just an object, the painted eyes manifest a point of view, concern and treasuring gaze. In this context, the study of eye miniatures complements the history of art, not only as a newly discovered subgenre of portrait miniatures, but for their ability to solicit a mode of looking that originates from within, connecting with the viewer and thus creating a unique sphere of intimate vision.

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