

Object as subject looking at another subject: Painted eye miniatures and the viewer

Hanneke Grootenboer
Treasuring the Gaze: Intimate Vision in Late Eighteenth-Century Eye Miniatures. Chicago, Chicago University Press 2012. 240 S., 24 Farb-, 51 s/w Abb. ISBN 978-0-226-30966-8. \$ 45.00

Among the many well-reproduced images in Hanneke Grootenboer's fascinating book is an anonymous oval miniature (*fig. 1*) of a right eye, blue and melancholy under a drooping eyelid, its gently curving eyebrow and delicate lashes suggesting it belongs (or belonged) to a woman rather than a man (pl. 13). Painted in watercolour on ivory this eye is shedding tears: two diamonds of unequal size are attached to the surface of the miniature, one just emerging from the inside corner of the eye and the other rolling down the cheek towards the edge of the frame. That frame in gold is evenly studded with pearls reminding viewers of the convention that, as with Mary Magdalen, tears are as precious and as pure as pearls. As Grootenboer explains, the fashion for eye miniatures was short-lived (it starts at the end of the eighteenth century and aside from a brief reprise under Queen Victoria ends by the second decade of the nineteenth century) but nonetheless compelling. The residue of this 'craze' is a collection of artefacts distributed across Europe in private and public collections that now appear bizarre and extremely difficult to classify. Are they, for example, portraits or something quite other? While many would be tempted to analyse such objects as fetishes, material relics given as love or mourning tokens, Grootenboer with characteristic perspicacity focuses on what it means to represent

a single eye for our understanding of how looking at, and seeing, images works. While we learn a great deal here about who owned eye miniatures and how they functioned within a history of the emotions, Grootenboer's book – the title notwithstanding – goes far wider than this and might, in fact, be accurately described as a historiography of the gaze interlocking with a philosophical enquiry into the nature of the image when it involves the human subject face to face with the human viewer.

THE PICTORIAL OBJECT TAKING CONTROL

After an introduction titled 'An Overlooked Episode in Vision's History' in which she reflects on Alois Riegl's analyses in *The Group Portraiture of Holland* (1902) demonstrating that it is not so much the viewing subject who takes control over pictorial objects but rather the other way round, Grootenboer takes the reader through a probing analysis of what intimacy means in relation to the look, arguing that in eye portraits the intimate gaze that is characteristic of miniatures which are employed in an exchange of looks painted and real (as the owners, often demonstrably in private spaces, contemplate the face of a loved one) is intensified. Just why eye miniatures have been overlooked or ignored is in itself an interesting question that might be worth pursuing through the history of collecting and the hierarchies of value within the discipline of Art History.

In this chapter we are introduced to a range of full size paintings such as Lorenzo Lotto's Portrait of Andrea Odoni of 1527 (which prompts Grootenboer to dissect Harry Berger's proposals of the de-theatricalisation of the portrait in the Renaissance: cf. *Fictions of the Pose. Rembrandt against the Italian Renaissance*, Stanford 2000) and Pompeo Batoni's Grand Tour portrait of Sir Sampson Gideon showing a portrait miniature to a friend (*fig. 2*). The miniature held open in Gideon's right hand has just arrived enclosed in a letter (or so



Fig. 1 Anonymous, eye miniature, ca. 1790. Watercolor on ivory with diamonds. London, Victoria and Albert Museum [Grootenboer 2012, pl. 13]

we are invited to understand) that he holds in his left hand. The contiguities between epistolary intimacy and visual devices such as eye miniatures are here subtly deconstructed as part of a poetics of space. As Grootenboer expresses it: “the miniature is capable of turning the space around it into a universe, albeit an intensely private one” (43). Throughout her book Grootenboer alerts the reader to the genuine extraordinariness of a genre of art – naturalistic portraiture – to which through familiarity we have become immune. By taking the eye miniature, “a knot in vision’s history” (7), and opening it up to scrutiny that is both theoretical and historical, she enables us to see afresh the complex problems posed by the structure of works of art in which an object that is in fact a subject is looking at its viewer who is also a subject.

A tiny image that looks back, an eye miniature in Grootenboer’s account is not only ‘spooky’ (which it surely is) but also epitomises the process of interpellation or, to invoke Hegel and Riegl, the ‘concern’ of the painted subject in the construction of self as viewer as well as self as

represented. In her second chapter, Grootenboer examines with great thoroughness the socio-historical aspects of peering, gazing, ogling and eighteenth-century cultures of watching; she opens with the moment in 1784 when the Prince Regent saw the recently widowed Mrs. Fitzherbert at the opera and, having fixed his eye upon her, fixed also his desire to make her his. When she resisted his overtures the heir to the British throne stabbed himself, hoping to force a promise of marriage from her.

The eye miniature which he sent her is most probably the first ever and the object that precipitated the craze through which, as Grootenboer proposes, the all-seeing eye of God or the supreme eye of reason familiar from the iconography of the French revolution and of masonic law, was secularised leading to the eye miniature as “a cultural symptom” or even “a bizarre outgrowth” (70). Eye miniatures are therefore a cultural symptom whose importance far outweighs their museum status as minor applied arts. We should assume, Grootenboer proposes, that eye portraits contain not a picture of someone’s eye but a portrayal of an individual’s gaze.



Fig. 2 Pompeo Batoni, Portrait of Sir Sampson Gideon with Unidentified Friend, 1767. Oil on canvas, 2,76 x 1,89 m. Melbourne, National Gallery of Victoria (Grootenboer 2012, pl. 4)

CRYING IMAGES AND DEATH MASKS

In chapter 3 Grootenboer concentrates on crying images and it is typical of her ability to throw off assumptions that, rather than simply accept such objects as part of the kinds of mourning cults that delivered us widow's weeds (the trailing black veils that bereaved women were expected to hide behind), elaborate epitaphs, death-bed utterances and hair jewellery, she asks for whom are these eyes weeping. Are they weeping for themselves or calling on a beholder to weep on their behalf? This conundrum leads Grootenboer to reflect on the withdrawal of the gaze in death and to the insight that eye portraits do not look 'at' but 'for' us and that this mode of vision exacts a loss for which the rhetoric of loss cannot properly account. These objects are not therefore elegiac but are the equivalents of apostrophe in rhetoric, that is, they animate the beholder to cry.

Central to this chapter is a discussion of the withdrawal of the gaze, the ultimate example of which is the eyes of the death mask which for all their apparent sightlessness nonetheless, as Jean-Luc Nancy (interpreting Heidegger; cf. *L'imagination masquée*, in: *Au fond des images*, Paris 2003, 147–179; *L'autre portrait*, Paris 2014) insisted, have a kind of look that is central to their images: the look of the dead offers up to us the death of the look or, in the case of the weeping eye miniatures a detachment of the gaze from the body, a with-drawing gaze that creates a 'present

absence'. It is in relation to this topic that Grootenboer introduces one of her most compelling passages of close reading. The study of wax mouldages, wax anatomies, and wax portraiture has been increasingly popular among art historians in the past two decades.

In some ways Julius von Schlosser's celebrated book on wax portraiture, first published in 1910–11, might be seen as a model for Grootenboer's own



Fig. 3 Anonymous, eye miniature, possibly of Lord Byron, ca. 1810. Watercolor on ivory. Paris, Musée Carnavalet (Grootenboer 2012, pl. 21)

book in that it took as its subject an apparently minor and neglected art form that had the capacity to shock later viewers. Grootenboer picks up on von Schlosser's use of the word 'indiscretion' to describe the annihilation of the distance between viewer and portrait that these hyper-realistic wax busts complete with glass eyes and implanted whiskers produce. She takes issue with the modern edition of the work for adding "Tote Blicke" (Dead Gazes) to the title (Julius von Schlosser, *Tote Blicke: Geschichte der Porträtbildnerei in Wachs. Ein Versuch*, hg. v. Thomas Medicus, Berlin 1993) since what is uncanny is that the eyes of wax figures appear not dead but very much alive and the figures are not mirror images of reality but transgressions of the image-concept.

TACKLING THE PANOPTICON

A central plank of Grootenboer's project is the challenge to what she sees as the pervasive and detrimental influence of theories of vision rooted in the perception psychology of Ernst H. Gombrich or Michel Foucault's 'visibility as trap', the ubiquitous model of the panopticon. It is in chapter 4 that Grootenboer tackles this literature and, although it seems at times a lengthy diversion from the eye miniature, her fairness in judging the likes of Norman Bryson on vision (cf. *Vision and Painting. The Logic of the Gaze*, New Haven/London 1983), her ability to synthesise, and her careful advocacy of an approach to her subject through object relations theory, as in the work of Melanie Klein, where the interactions between feelings inside and objects outside the body are explored, should make this chapter inestimably useful to students as well as their teachers.

While the idea of a bridge between a psycho-analytic proposition that we wish what we see to enter our bodies – that gazing is a kind of devouring with the eyes – may seem for some a step too far in an analysis of a fairly limited number of specific objects, it is not only the form of the miniature and its image that justifies this approach but also what we know historically of how it was deployed. Mozart obsessively kissed his wife's miniature when away from home and Major André, captured by the

enemy in the American War of Independence, claimed he would commit suicide by swallowing his loved one's miniature rather than have it taken from him.

The book concludes with a case study of Lord Byron's eye miniature (*fig. 3*) and his "rattlesnake gaze" (167), an illuminating account that, drawing on the work of Jacques Lacan, highlights the clash of looks. Because Byron was such a cult figure whose facial representation, locks of hair, and memorabilia were collected, circulated, bought and sold, and whose reputation was that of a dangerous seducer, this topic enables Grootenboer to open up questions of authenticity. Does Byron's eye portrait, she aptly asks, "in fact encapsulate the very essence of his unreliable look, in the multiple sense of the word?" (163) Having opened her book with the question what, in an eye portrait, has been left of portraiture, Grootenboer concludes with the thought that an eye miniature makes possible the being lost in a look, comparable to the kind of daydreaming that Gaston Bachelard explores in *La Poétique de la rêverie* (1961), which creates a space in which one is alone with oneself – lost from the world. So what remains in eye pictures, she concludes, is the portrait's intimate concern, "its painted look plunging into 'being in the world', as the only way it can lose itself, or release itself." (174)

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