

Celebrating its quasiquintennial anniversary this year, RAY WINDER, President of the Royal Society of Miniature Painters, Sculptors and Gravers, previews the society's forthcoming exhibition and its long connection with royalty

Royalty in MINIATURE

ALTHOUGH MINIATURE PAINTINGS were originally used to illustrate and decorate handwritten books, it wasn't until around 1525 that the first portrait miniature appeared in England. Painted by Lucas Horenbout it was of King Henry VIII, who must have been delighted with the painting as he retained him as a court painter alongside artists working on a much larger scale.

Horenbout taught Hans Holbein the art of miniature painting, with his pupil going on to become considerably more famous than his master. Holbein had the unenviable task of being despatched abroad to paint miniature portraits of suitable marriage candidates for the king. It is not clear if his portrait of Anne of Cleves was just too flattering or that Henry was simply not attracted to her, but their marriage lasted only six months.

All subsequent monarchs continued this patronage of portrait miniatures. Due to their compact size they proved useful as personal gifts and were given to those in favour to be worn as treasured ornaments hung around the neck or suspended in beautiful enamelled cases. Such had the popularity of miniature portraits become that by the late 17th century there was a dearth of English miniature painters as it was no longer the exclusive preserve of royalty: those wealthy enough could also have tiny portraits of loved ones and friends.

Although Queen Victoria commissioned miniature portraits of her immediate and wider family for herself and close friends throughout her reign, the perfecting of the photographic image in 1839 by Louis Daguerre would be

a landmark in the history of the miniature portrait. His daguerreotypes paved the way for the more easily produced and hugely popular sepia carte de visite so loved by the Victorians (the queen and Prince Albert were enthusiastic followers of this new medium).

Miniature painters fell out of favour and many were forced to add photography to their artistic services offering tinting and colouring of photographs. But there was always going to be that small band who doggedly stuck to what they enjoyed doing: painting small.

This persistence was rewarded in 1896 when not one but two societies were formed to promote the art of miniature painting. Talk of amalgamation followed and soon a respectful 'exchange of letters' occurred. After much discussion, the Society of Miniature Painters under the presidency of Alyn Williams won the day (which was only right, since he had come up with the idea two years earlier).

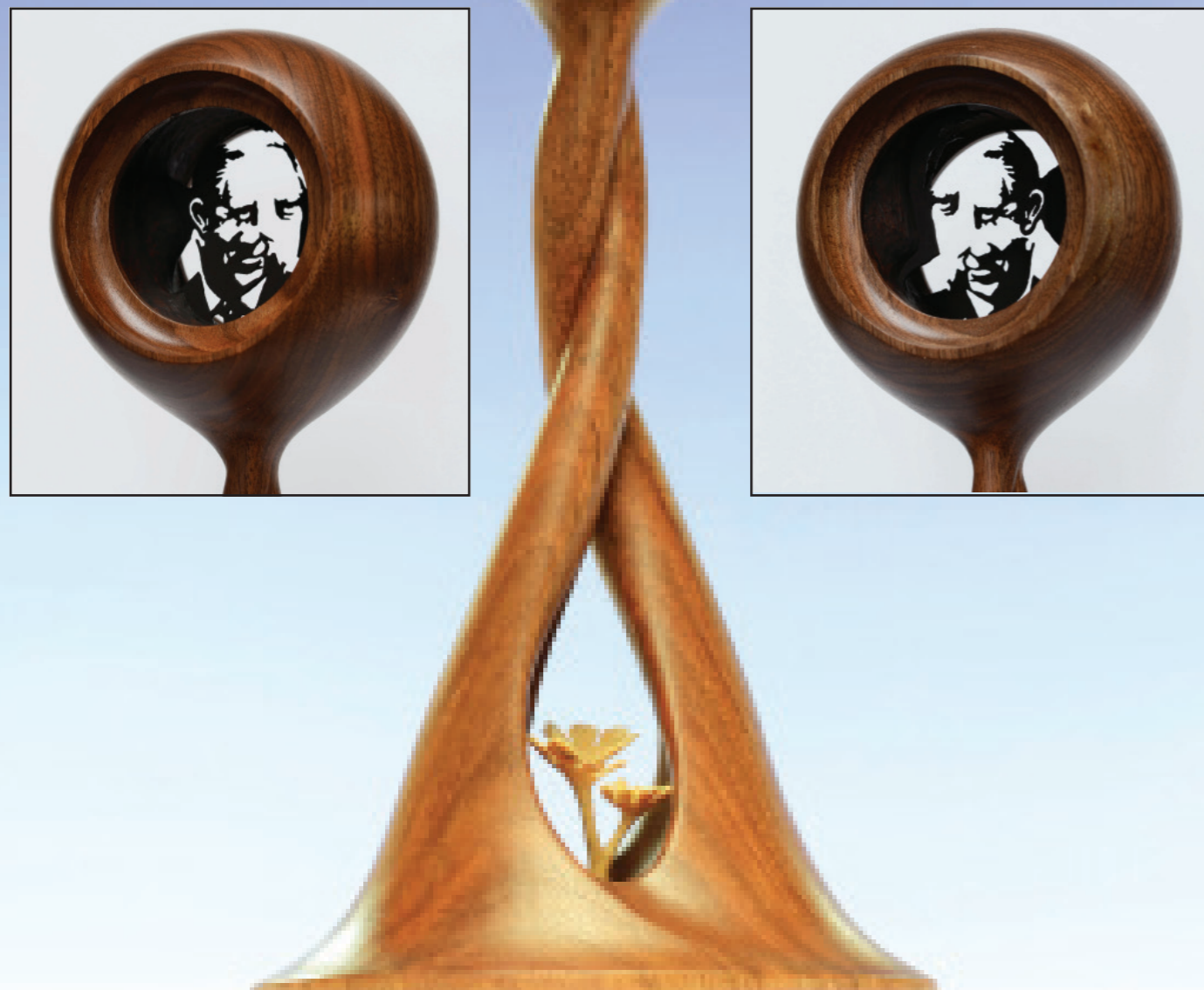
Wasting no time, the new committee was swiftly up and running and on 23 September 1896 their inaugural exhibition was held at the Modern Gallery in Old Bond Street, London.

In reviewing the exhibition, *The Times* noted that 'there is little skill and less art in the average photographic portrait and there are so many sitters, especially among women, who "never photograph well", that the results are often more surprising than satisfactory. There is room for the miniaturists after all.'

This first exhibition welcomed the Princess of Wales and other members of the royal family, with Princess Louise, Marchioness of Lorne giving her accolade to the society by becoming an honorary member. ▶

Queen Elizabeth II in the early years of her reign, by Lily Ogilvie





By 1904 King Edward VII had bestowed the 'royal' title on the society and become its patron. The royal patronage was continued by King George V and in 1926 he ordered the addition of 'Sculptors and Gravers'. From then on, the official title was the Royal Society of Miniature Painters, Sculptors and Gravers. Today, this is sometimes more conveniently abbreviated to the Royal Miniature Society or simply the RMS.

The royal association continues with HRH The Prince of Wales as current patron.

The RMS has its own collection of miniature paintings that have been donated over the years, including three excellent 20th-century royal portraits painted by previous members.

Edward VII, painted in 1910 in watercolour on ivory by Elizabeth Baly Vivian, shows the king wearing the uniform of the Honourable Artillery Company. The portrait of George V is by one of the founders of the RMS and a long-standing president, Alyn Williams: painted in watercolour on ivory it dates from 1935. Alyn Williams was to paint many members of the royal family.

The beautiful portrait of the young Queen Elizabeth II by former RMS vice-president Lily Ogilvie dates from around 1957 and is also painted in watercolour on ivory. It is unusual in being three-quarter length and shows Her Majesty in full evening dress.

Back in the 1929 exhibition a previous RMS president displayed an anamorphic painting of the then patron King George V; it caused a great deal of interest (the image being distorted until viewed in a cylindrical mirror). To mark this year's RMS anniversary I have created a contemporary equivalent in wood of our current patron, the Prince of Wales.

Carved from English walnut, the face is broken down into three parts on different levels and must be viewed from a precise angle to be recognisable. The tiny boxwood shoot in the base is a Delphinium – understood to be the prince's favourite flower. I titled the sculpture *Portal* as it is reminiscent of looking through a window.

So, with all this history behind us where is miniature art today? It's in fine fettle, with many dedicated societies across the world of which the Royal Miniature Society is the oldest and the most prestigious. There are many talented artists quietly and patiently beaver away on tiny little paintings and sculptures that will easily fit in a pocket, continuing the long tradition of unashamedly old-fashioned craftsmanship with new and innovative ideas and techniques.

At our 125th anniversary exhibition this year there will be more than 400 pieces of art to view and buy, showcasing a range of styles and techniques including paintings, pencil drawings, porcelain, illumination, glass engraving, carving and silversmithing with one thing in common: they will all be small.

Supported by deep values and rich tradition, miniature art is thriving and remains an exciting and challenging genre for artist and viewer alike. The Royal Miniature Society, champions of progression in its field, will continue to welcome new approaches with open arms. 

The Royal Society of Miniature Painters, Sculptors and Gravers 125th anniversary exhibition is at the Mall Galleries in London from 25 November to 5 December. Entry is free. Information: www.royal-miniature-society.org.uk

RIGHT: George V, by Alyn Williams, one of the founders of the Royal Miniature Society



BELOW: Edward VII, painted by Elizabeth Baly Vivian in 1910, the year of the monarch's death

OPPOSITE: *Portal*, by Ray Winder, depicting the current RMS royal patron

