

Miniature Worlds





Fig. 1. Dr. Robert Hazard, dressed miniature. Courtesy the Connecticut Historical Society, Hartford, Connecticut.



Fig. 2. Betsey Way Champlain, unidentified portrait. Courtesy of R. MacMullen.



Fig. 3. Eliza Way Champlain, *Iris*. Courtesy of R. MacMullen.

Look closely at these images. However large they appear on your computer screen, in reality they are tiny indeed. The first, a dressed miniature portrait, probably depicting Dr. Robert Hazard, measures just under six inches from the top of the frame to the bottom; it was created by Mary Way around 1800. Hazard's head is painted, his torso assembled from bits of cloth and lace. The second portrait, watercolor on ivory, is about half the size of Hazard's portrait. The history of this unfinished painting of an unidentified woman isn't clear. Perhaps it was rejected by the sitter. Perhaps it was rejected by the artist, Mary Way's sister, Betsey Way Champlain. The final image, the allegorical *Iris*, measures only 1 1/2 inches in diameter—small enough to fit inside the case of an early-nineteenth-century pocket watch. Although we don't know whose watch *Iris* once decorated, we do know that it was painted by Betsey Champlain's daughter, Eliza.

Small. Quaint. Curious. And a far cry from that era's most familiar paintings—the magisterial portraits of Founding Fathers and republican gentry that have long decorated history textbooks and the flat likenesses of rural New Englanders that have acquired new cachet as the relics of a lost “folk” culture. Consider that these images were created by women, a family of women, and they become both more and less peculiar. While it might surprise you to discover two sisters and a daughter trying to support themselves as miniaturists in the early republic, you might decide that the obscurity of the artists serves to explain the oddness of their work: after all, marginal painters can be expected to produce marginal paintings.

At least, that was the conclusion that Betsey Champlain's son William reached in 1825. William was proud of his mother, who had worked as a miniaturist in Connecticut since the 1790s. Still, to his eye, Betsey's best work signified only wasted potential. After watching her laboriously copying a portrait by celebrated New York City miniaturist Nathaniel Rogers, William wrote, “I wish it had been in her power to be instructed by some person like Rogers . . . But

she labors under a thousand difficulties to prevent her progress in the art which others have not." With better instruction for her eye, her hand, and her taste, he imagined, Betsey might have claimed a place among the nation's most fashionable painters, gaining artistic and perhaps financial independence. Although he confined his remarks to his mother, he might just as well have extended his remarks to include his aunt and sister, who also attempted to fashion careers as painters in the early republic. Emphasizing his mother's distance from cosmopolitan techniques and aesthetics and the material success that might reward them, William's comments anticipated contemporary perspectives on women who painted for pleasure and profit in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. A focus on the painting exposes second-rate art; a focus on the artist reveals a second-class citizen. But this emphasis on insufficiency and exclusion obscures a more interesting story about the painters, their work, and their world.

Sisters Mary Way and Elizabeth Way (Champlain) were born into a New London, Connecticut, mercantile family just before the Revolution. By the 1790s, when they reached their early twenties, both were painting miniature portraits of neighbors and relatives. Betsey continued to paint miniatures and teach painting after her marriage to George Champlain in 1794, perhaps because his volatile fortunes as a ship captain often left the family in straitened circumstances. Between her husband's retirement in the 1810s and his death in 1820, Betsey's painting played a critical role in the family's support. As a widow, she lived largely on her earnings as a painter, supplemented by irregular contributions from her sons. Over the course of her thirty-year career, Champlain attracted commissions from local notables as well as distinguished visitors, including Universalist minister John Murray in 1799 and the brother of Commodore Perry in 1822. But the flux of demand in a town like New London required her to hone her entrepreneurial talents along with her artistic ones. In the 1820s, Champlain expanded her business by capitalizing on the popularity of mourning tokens. It paid to take likenesses from corpses for, as she explained, "[Y]ou can ask what you please" from the bereaved.

Betsey Way's sister, Mary Way, the best known of the three women, abandoned Connecticut for New York City in 1811 at the age of forty-two. There she quickly worked her way into the fringes of a coterie of successful painters including John Jarvis, Joseph Wood, and Anson Dickinson, who critiqued her style and loaned her paintings to copy. By 1818, Mary Way had attracted a significant clientele, drawing both from parishioners at her Universalist church and older New London connections; she advertised a "ladies drawing academy" in the New York papers and she had two miniatures on ivory included in the annual exhibition of the American Academy of Fine Arts. Mary Way was never a star in the city's art scene. And she never attained financial security. Still, when blindness ended her career in 1820, the Academy sponsored a benefit to raise money on her behalf.

Not surprisingly, Eliza Way Champlain (Betsey's daughter and Mary's niece) benefited from an early introduction to art. As a teenager, she painted watch

papers and copied engravings, graduating to ivory miniatures and teaching by the time she reached her twenties. She learned painting from her mother and especially her aunt, whose tireless criticism continued unabated long after the older woman had gone blind. Mary Way worked especially hard to position Eliza for a career as a painter. Over the course of several extended visits to New York City between 1815 and 1820, Eliza studied painting with her aunt, met many of Way's artist-friends, and attended Academy exhibitions and art auctions to view examples of fine art. In the 1820s, she made a series of half-hearted attempts to support herself in New York City by giving art lessons to young ladies and painting portraits, allegorical "fancy-pieces," and watch papers. But she found that she lacked the survival skills necessary to compete in an art market saturated with European émigrés and other women painter-cum-teachers. After her marriage in 1826 she painted sporadically before the demands of childcare and her own indifferent health induced her to "abandon [it] entirely."

Like most other eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century American painters, the Way-Champlain women found their careers shaped partly by their distance from the protocols that dominated European, and especially English, academic painting. Anglo-American artists found their commissions confined largely to portraits rather than more prestigious historical or allegorical subjects. The majority found themselves executing those portraits with less—and less sophisticated—training than their English counterparts boasted. The general problems that confronted American painters were only compounded for women artists, much as William Champlain had remarked. Access to formal studio training was all but nonexistent, with the notable exception of James Peale's daughters, who enjoyed lengthy apprenticeships under their famous father's tutelage. Even after a woman mastered painting's technical skills and the theory that stood behind them, she encountered the nagging problem of publicity. A successful artist had to exhibit and advertise. She necessarily exposed herself to strangers as she drummed up a clientele and again when she sat down to capture their likenesses. The training needed to transform raw talent into polished style was beyond most women's reach just as the demands of professional painting were at odds with the standards of feminine decorum.

If the Way-Champlain women were perforce excluded from the nation's most rarified artistic circles, neither can they be subsumed within the ranks of artisan-painters who scoured the countryside recording the likenesses of provincial New Englanders. None of the three women conformed to the pattern of accidental vocation and ad hoc itinerancy that marked the careers of men like James Guild or Chester Harding, who stumbled into careers as painters and developed both skills and reputation while traveling through rural America. Consider too the women's chosen medium: Portrait miniatures on ivory demanded a high level of technical skill to ensure that the thin washes of color adhered to the surface; they also required a considerable investment in materials. Neither cosmopolitan elites nor artisanal itinerants, the Way-Champlain women followed a different path, one that owed less to the various strategies pursued by male painters than to the expansion and transformation of women's education.

In the decades immediately preceding and following the Revolution, scores of newly opened academies and seminaries afforded young women unprecedented instruction in rhetoric, history, geography, philosophy, and the natural sciences. Most of these schools also offered training in the “accomplishments”: drawing, painting, embroidery, music, and dancing. Although parents paid extra for this genteel instruction, it proved enormously popular. In fact, it was the income generated from these classes that kept many schools afloat. The accomplishments were neither frivolous distractions from the serious business of education nor the distant forerunners of modern day home economics classes, preparing girls for careers as wives and mothers. Instead, accomplishments and book learning were imagined as complementary parts of a single, unified project. Both were calculated to inculcate and demonstrate the virtuousness of American women, to provide proof of their sensibility. As an ideal, sensibility married order and harmony, reason and feeling, and enshrined taste both as a register of virtue and a delineator of class. The interior qualities that comprised sensibility manifested themselves externally in graceful bearing, transparent coloring, and expressive eye. They acquired a social dimension through sympathetic conversation, through *belles lettres*, and especially for women, through the accomplishments. Far more than a collection of desirable personal characteristics, sensibility carried broad political significance: it was both the precondition for virtuous citizenry and the best evidence of it.

While no evidence survives to explain exactly how or when the Way sisters learned to paint, it seems probable that they encountered some sort of art instruction during stints at one of Connecticut’s many female academies. The titles of Mary Way’s early decorative pieces—*Friendship* and *Amabilité*, for example—were popular subjects both for school girls’ needlework pictures and for the “improving” prose and verse that filled their commonplace books. Or consider Way’s unique dressed miniatures, her earliest surviving work. Like the portraits of Dr. Hazard and Mrs. Smith (below), these portraits positioned tiny watercolor profiles, carefully cut out of paper, atop busts fashioned from cloth, braid, lace, and other trimmings. The combination of delicately painted faces, applique, embroidery, and fine decorative sewing recalls the elaborate needlework pictures that young ladies produced at the culmination of their schooling.



Fig. 4. Mrs. Sarah Raymond Smith, dressed miniature. Courtesy the Connecticut Historical Society, Hartford, Connecticut.

Regardless of whether female academies provided Mary and Betsey with their earliest training, the public's appetite for accomplishment provided all three Way-Champlain women with a market for their skills. Each woman periodically accepted individual students and Mary and Eliza both operated formal schools or drawing academies that offered instruction to groups of young ladies. Mary and Eliza also accepted assignments to create images that could be incorporated into other women's badges of accomplishment. Teenaged Eliza, for example, copied an engraving of the *Marquis de Salvo* for inclusion in a New London women's school; her painting would have educated students in the rudiments of taste and provided a model for their own paintings and needlework pictures. And Mary Way once accepted a commission to copy an "ellegant engraving" of *Christ Healing the Blind* onto a piece of silk stretching more than half a yard "for a young lady to embroider."

If the paintings and careers of all three Way-Champlain women reveal the broad influence of the culture of female accomplishment, so too do they mark changes within in it. Surviving portraits and literary evidence suggest that neither Mary Way nor Betsey Way Champlain paid much attention to the stylistic innovations that transformed portrait miniatures in the late 1810s and early 1820s: the use of larger, rectangular—rather than oval—ivories; a palette that included more and brighter colors; and the inclusion of the detailed backgrounds, elaborate props, and drapery swags that had long distinguished oil portraits. Instead, the older women relied upon oval and round ivories and soft, monochromatic color schemes, positioning their sitters' heads high on the ivory. They marshaled their understanding of color theory and their technical skills to exploit ivory's special qualities, using its translucence to create the luminous skin their sitters desired. In other words, they continued to rely

upon the pictorial conventions that dominated miniature portraiture during the Federal Period, conventions that had given physical form to the abstractions of sensibility.

In their depiction of women, for example, the sisters adhered to the visual standards of virtuous sensibility, republican style—striving for “due proportion, symmetry, ease and grace.” Way’s portrayal of allegorical figures apparently recapitulated the conventions that shaped countless images of Liberty and Columbia. Critiquing an early version of the allegorical *Fancy*, painted by her niece, Mary Way observed that the figure’s stiffness did “not accord” with her “ideas of ease and elegance.” Instead, the form should be “light and airy, in a loose flowing robe . . . at least, not look like a stick with corsets on and a frock tied round it.” Similar conventions governed both sisters’ depiction of real women. Unornamented clothing and hair signaled a woman’s virtue, delicate coloring suggested her sensitivity, graceful posture embodied her gentility, and a plain background drew attention to the countenance that revealed her character. The final effect was one of “softness and harmony,” “simplicity and elegance.” According to Eliza Champlain, these portraits rivaled the work of “the ancients” in their unadorned beauty. Drawing both on the culture of female accomplishment and the visual conventions of virtue, the older women’s portraits captured and constructed the sensibility of their sitters.

Like her mother and her aunt, Eliza Champlain’s progress as an artist was mediated by the culture of female accomplishment. But by the 1820s, the meanings and aesthetics of accomplishment had shifted. Eliza’s work marked a sharp departure from the standards of “simplicity and elegance” endorsed by her aunt and mother. She described dressing her female sitters in an abundance of color, pattern, and drapery; she situated them in rooms, against landscapes, and clutching volumes of Byron’s poetry. The stylistic differences are yet more pronounced on the watch papers and “fancy pieces” that Champlain produced for sale and as gifts for her patrons and that made up the bulk of her work. In these tiny images, ornamental flowers saturated with color crowd in on women whose heart-shaped faces and enormous eyes deviate from the neoclassical ideal. In short, these paintings owe far less to the sensibility of the eighteenth century than the sentimentality of the nineteenth. At the same time, the culture of female accomplishment had become less accomplished and more female. The flowers and the allegorical “cupids and flying females” that were Eliza Champlain’s favorite subjects had become the special province of young women’s amateur art.





Fig. 5. Eliza Way Champlain, Fancy. Courtesy of R. MacMullen.

During Champlain's short-lived career as a teacher, her pupils learned to paint by copying her own versions of floral wreaths, Fancy, and Cupid. These themes were deemed especially appropriate for women during a period when the art training available to upper- and especially middle-class women was rapidly expanding. By the early decades of the nineteenth century, this visual vocabulary, produced and reproduced by young women in an extraordinarily wide variety of media, spelled amateurism and female amateurism at that. Even Mary Way criticized her niece's work as "chaste, labour'd, [and] mincing"—terms that cast the young woman not simply as a mediocre artist but a mediocre *female* artist. Champlain's subjects, style, to say nothing of her metier—the watercolor miniature—served to underscore her artistic and economic dependence on a derivative amateurism while exaggerating the difference between her own paintings and the magisterial canvases that gave her such pleasure at exhibitions and auctions. Like her mother and her aunt, Eliza Champlain could claim that her brush was inspired by Fancy, but she did so in a culture that was increasingly preoccupied with genius.

Mary Way, Betsey Way Champlain, and Eliza Champlain never attained wealth or fame. All three scrambled to make ends meet, relying on the generosity of kin and friends to make up the difference when they fell short. Most of their work has long since disappeared, surviving only as references in their letters. Even Mary Way, the most successful of the three and the one best known in her day and ours, survives as a funky footnote, her place in American art history secured with her earliest work, the dressed miniatures. But the Way-Champlain women compel us to think about women's role in arts, in America's emerging culture industry. Their extensive correspondence and their scattered paintings can illuminate the efforts of ordinary women and men to claim the mantle of sensibility for themselves. Just as important, they can help us to understand how that culture of sensibility gave way to the nineteenth-century culture of sentimentality and the gains and losses that shift spelled for women artists.

Scroll back up to the top of this story and look closely at those three images. Small? Very. Quaint? Maybe. Curious? Absolutely. But perhaps your curiosity now extends beyond the images to include their makers and their world, a world we have yet to recover.

**Further Reading:** The Way-Champlain family papers, which include letters, poetry, and imaginative writings, are deposited at the [American Antiquarian Society](#). They may be accessed on the Web by entering a search for "Way-Champlain" into the AAS's [online catalog](#). Ramsay MacMullen has edited a splendid collection of the family's letters, *Sisters of the Brush: Their Family, Art, Lives, and Letters, 1797-1833* (New Haven, Conn., 1997). American miniature portraits get their fullest treatment to date in Robin Jaffee Frank's *Love and Loss: American Portrait and Mourning Miniatures* (New Haven, Conn., 2000), a book whose distinctive size and design comes close to recapturing the charm of the paintings themselves. Mary Way's early work is described in William Lamson Warren, "Mary Way's Dressed Miniatures," *The Magazine Antiques* (October 1992): 540-49. The shifting significance of miniature portraiture is traced by Anne Verplanck in "The Social Meanings of Portrait Miniatures in Philadelphia, 1760-1820," in Ann Smart Martin and J. Ritchie Garrison, eds., *American Material Culture: The Shape of the Field* (Winterthur, Del., 1997). On the social barriers confronting women painters in the early republic, see Anne Sue Hirshorn, "Anna Claypoole, Margareta, and Sarah Miriam Peale: Modes of Accomplishment and Fortune," in Lillian B. Miller, ed., *The Peale Family: Creation of a Legacy, 1770-1870* (Washington, D.C., 1996). David Lubin's fine "Lily Martin Spencer's Domestic Genre Painting in Antebellum America," in David C. Miller, ed., *American Iconology: New Approaches to Nineteenth-Century Art and Literature* (New Haven, Conn., 1993) is an exemplary analysis of one woman's career and painting. Ann Bermingham's *Learning to Draw: Studies in the Cultural History of a Polite and Useful Art* (New Haven, Conn., 2000) includes a useful analysis of British women's drawing and painting. *Anonymous Was a Woman* (New York, 1979) by Mirra Bank, offers an accessible survey of women painters in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America. For general descriptions of the culture of accomplishment at academies and seminaries, see Lynne Templeton Brickley's dissertation, "Sarah Pierce's Litchfield Female Academy, 1792-1833" (Harvard University, 1985). Emily Noyes Vanderpoel, *Chronicles of a Pioneer School: The Litchfield Female Academy, Litchfield, Connecticut, 1792-1833* (Cambridge, Mass., 1902), and William C. Reichel, *A History of the Rise, Progress, and Present Condition of the Bethlehem Female Seminary with a Catalogue of Its Pupils, 1785-1858* (Philadelphia, 1858), offer extracts from commonplace books and describe students' artwork. Betty Ring's definitive studies of ornamental needlework, including *Let Virtue be a Guide to Thee: Needlework in the Education of Rhode Island Women* (Providence, R.I., 1983) and *Girlhood Embroidery: American Samplers and Pictorial Needlework, 1690-1850* (New York, 1993), vols. 1-2, locate "schoolgirl art" in national and transatlantic literary and visual cultures. Catherine Keene Fields and Lisa C. Knightlinger, eds., "To Ornament Their Minds:" *Sarah Pierce's Litchfield Academy, 1792-1833* (Litchfield Conn., 1993) and Suzanne L. Flynt, *Ornamental*

*and Useful Accomplishments: Schoolgirl Education and Deerfield Academy, 1800-1830* (Deerfield, Mass., 1988) explore students' work at two academies. The careers of early American portrait artists who have attained canonical status have been creatively explored by Margaretta Lovell in several essays, especially "Painters and Their Customers: Aspects of Art and Money in Eighteenth-Century America" in Cary Carson, et al., eds., *Consuming Interests: The Style of Life in the Eighteenth Century* (Charlottesville, Va., 1994) and "Bodies of Illusion: Portraits, People, and the Construction of Memory," in Robert Blair St. George, ed., *Possible Pasts: Becoming Colonial in Early America* (Ithaca, 2000). Philadelphia's famous Peale family has attracted the most attention from art historians, museum curators, and historians. *The Peale Family: Creation of a Legacy, 1770-1870* provides an especially wide-ranging and beautifully illustrated overview of the Peales and their world. Of course, not all painters found themselves in the canon. For a discussions of the artisanal itinerants who produced "folk" or "primitive" portraits, see David Jaffee's "One of the Primitive Sort: Portrait Makers of the Rural North, 1760-1860" in Hahn and Prude, eds., *The Countryside in the Age of Capitalist Transformation* (Chapel Hill, 1985): 103-38. Ellen Hickey Grayson's work shifts our attention away from the artists to the aesthetics of the paintings themselves; see for example "Toward a New Understanding of the Aesthetics of 'Folk' Portraits," in Peter Benes, ed., *Painting and Portrait Making in the American Northeast* (Boston, 1995): 217-34. David Jaffee, et al., eds., *Meet Your Neighbors: New England Portraits, Painters, & Society, 1790-1850* (Sturbridge, Mass., 1992) provides an extensive description of New England's itinerant artists and their clientele. On the broad connections between aesthetics, politics, and culture in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, see Jay Fleigelman, *Declaring Independence: Jefferson, Natural Language, and the Culture of Performance* (Stanford, Calif., 1993) and David S. Shields, *Civil Tongues and Polite Letters in British America* (Chapel Hill, 1997); these books also map the landscape of sensibility. David Waldstreicher's *In the Midst of Perpetual Fêtes: The Making of American Nationalism, 1760-1820* (Chapel Hill, 1997) makes clear the role of sentiment and sensibility in early national political culture while David Steinberg's essay "Charles Willson Peale Portrays the Body Politic," in *The Peale Family*, analyzes the pictorial conventions of republican virtue, including female virtue. Neil Harris explores the connections between the social history of early American art and emergent nationalism in *The Artist in American Society: The Formative Years* (New York, 1966).

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