

Benjamin Trott

(1770 – 27 Nov 1843)

The National Intelligencer, November 29, 1843

On Monday afternoon, after a lingering illness, Benjamin Trott, artist. This gentleman was a native of Boston and it was his proud boast that he had been the intimate friend of the celebrated Gilbert Stuart. Mr. Trott was an enthusiastic follower of his profession. His mind was vigorous, his genius undoubted, and his reputation equal to that of any other engaged in similar pursuits. His style of miniature coloring was rich and decisive, and bore a strong resemblance to the oil paintings of his friend Stuart. He has died far from the land of his birth, but here he has found friends who can mourn over the fate of poor Trott. His funeral will take place this day, at 12 o'clock from Mr. Clary's, on H street north, between 10th and 11th streets west.

Dale T. Johnson, *American Portrait Miniatures in the Manney Collection*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Benjamin Trott (ca. 1770-1843)

Benjamin Trott, one of this country's foremost miniature painters, was born in Boston. Where he was instructed is not known; according to his friend William Dunlap, Trott arrived in New York in 1793 having already "attained a great portion of skill" (all Dunlap quotations for Trott: 1834, vol. 1, pp. 414-415, 430).

Trott attracted the attention of Gilbert Stuart (1755-1828), who had recently returned from Dublin in the company of Walter Robertson. A few months later Stuart left New York for Philadelphia, accompanied by Trott. When Stuart painted his first portrait of Washington, Trott made a miniature copy after it (unlocated) which was engraved at least five times. Stuart called the best and closest of his imitators; Trott made many copies after the master. Dunlap observed that Stuart "assisted (Trott) by advice, and recommended him. Trott's blunt and caustic manner was probably to Stuart's taste."

Trott's irrational jealousy and his eccentric nature have been well documented. When Robertson and Robert Field were also in Philadelphia, wrote Dunlap, "Field and Robertson both annoyed Trott." Of Robertson (Trott claimed that) his excellence depended upon the secret he possessed "the chemical composition with which he mixed and used his colors; of Field, that his work was too much like engraving."

In 1797 Trott returned to New York, then retreated to Albany because of a yellow fever epidemic, moved back to New York in 1799, and by 1804 was in Philadelphia again. The following year he packed up the tools of his trade and traveled on horseback through western Pennsylvania, Kentucky, and Ohio, a journey that proved financially successful. He returned to Philadelphia once more in 1806, listing himself in the city directory there every year but one until 1820. Dunlap recorded that in 1806 he himself "became somewhat intimate with Trott and pleased with the pungency of his remarks and amused by the eccentricity of his manners. At this time his reputation was at its height. . . by his distillations and filterings he produced some of the cleanest pigments that I ever used; and he bestowed upon me specimens of all the necessary colors for miniature." Trott was less generous when he met Edward Greene Malbone, who proposed that they exchange examples of their work: "the fame of the young painter annoyed Trott," wrote Dunlap, and he refused. In 1809 Trott shared a house and studio with Thomas Sully.

Trott became a member of the Society of Artists and contributed to their exhibitions at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts from 1811 to 1814. In 1812 a critic signing himself G.M. praised

Trott's miniatures for possessing "all the force and effort of the best oil painting . . . and the . . . likeness, dignity of character, expression and harmony of coloring . . . approach nearer to the exquisite productions of Stuart, than those of any other artist in America" (Portfolio, July 182; quoted in Boston, 1944 [see bibliography for Trott], p. 267).

In 1819 Trott traveled south to Norfolk and Charleston. On his return to Philadelphia he married precipitously and imprudently. In 1823 he settled in Newark, New Jersey, where he obtained a divorce and lived in relative obscurity until about 1829. As the vogue shifted from light-colored, translucent miniatures toward opaquely painted ones, Trott's work had fallen out of favor. He moved to New York, avoiding Philadelphia, where he felt he had lost his public. In 1833 he was in Boston. Trott moved to Baltimore in 1839, writing to a friend, A. Woolcot: "I am at present busy painting in miniature how long it may last I can't tell so far I have been frustrated in giving satisfaction to the few I have painted who are of the right kind. I have had many difficulties to encounter besides ill health and the want of money" (January 2, 1839: correspondence in Gratz Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania). He died in Washington D.C.

Trott's early copies in miniature after Stuart, such as the portrait of Joseph Anthony, Jr. (Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven), reveal his initial indebtedness to his rival, Robertson, as well: backgrounds are dark and densely hatched on the diagonal, and the treatment is labored. As his own style began to develop, the background hatching diminished and the heads of his subjects became large and angular.

Trott's work is often criticized for its unevenness, but the miniatures from the period about 1800-1825 are generally finely executed and consistent in style. His technique had rapidly matured into an assured, dashing, fluid brushwork applied in natural, clear colors. Backgrounds with a sky motif were treated by floating on thin washes of white and blue and leaving large areas of the pure ivory unpainted. Hatching was confined to the areas on either side of the shoulders. Trott posed his sitters elegantly and usually similarly, with body turned to the left and an almost full face making arresting eye contact with the viewer. Subjects have elongated necks and wear coats with extremely high collars. The coats are rendered with broad washes; the jabots are painted with bold, rapid strokes that heighten the portraits' immediacy. Traces of the preparatory drawing can often be seen. Shadows are articulated in blue around the eyes, nose, and mouth. Men, their hair frequently brushed forward in the coup de vent style, at times appear disheveled—even rakish.

For likenesses of women, Trott continued to employ on occasion a dark, hatched background. His late works were undistinguished because of changes in fashion and the effects of his diminished circumstances. Trott rarely signed his miniatures.

Dictionary of American Biography

TROTT, BENJAMIN (c. 1770-c. 1841), portrait painter in miniature and oil, was born probably in Boston, Mass. He first set himself up as a painter in 1791 in New York. Several years later he moved to Philadelphia, which was his headquarters for many years, to make miniatures after the portraits of Gilbert Stuart [q.v.]. With his friend Elkanah Tisdale he lived in Albany for a time about 1796 (Dunlap, post. Vol. I p. 354). He devoted 1805 to a horseback tour of the "western world beyond the mountains" (Ibid., vol. II, p. 99). In 1812 he exhibited at the Pennsylvania Academy, receiving glowing attention from the press. He was painting in Charleston, S. C., in 1819. Following an obscure marriage made in Philadelphia he went to Newark, N. J., in 1823 to obtain a divorce, and lived there painting for several years. The three years following 1829 he spent in New York because, as Dunlap says, he felt he had lost his public in Philadelphia. In 1833 he moved to Boston. His last residence was in Baltimore, where he went in 1839; he appears in the Baltimore directory for 1840-41 as "B. Trott. Portrait and miniature painter. Office cor. St. Paul and Fayette Streets." William Dunlap [q.v.] says Trott "was of the full

medium height, thin, with a prepossessing countenance” (Ibid., vol. II, p. 101). He lived his life as a man with a grievance, his sense of inferiority centering about the painter’s technical problems. Possibly from being self-taught, he lacked the authority of a system and always imagined other painters possessed secrets he did not know. Dunlap once saw him experimenting on a miniature by Walter Robertson, half obliterating it in his efforts to discover the secret of its brilliance, making his way “beneath the surface like a mole, and in equal darkness” (Ibid., vol. II, p. 98). He refused to exchange miniatures with Edward Greene Malbone [q.v.], suspecting some mischievous plan. Yet he was a close friend of David Edwin [q.v.], the engraver; he won the confidence and admiration of Stuart, who is said to have enjoyed his blunt and caustic manner; and he is said twice to have shared a house with Thomas Sully [q.v.] in Philadelphia (Ibid., vol. II, p. 100). Dunlap’s analysis of Trott’s personality is confirmed by examples of the artist’s work, such as the Joseph Anthony miniatures, which show him insecure in his method and ‘lacking in confidence.

His earliest style is unknown. The first examples known, which date from 1795, were painted with broad free strokes, with studied concentration on the face, with attractive and lifelike color. Much of the ivory was left showing through, and the backgrounds as a rule were light. The characteristics by which any of Trott’s best miniatures may be recognized are those which prevail in this period. It is likely that Stuart’s influence upon his style was a determining one, but he evolved from this a manner of his own which is distinguished by his talent for characterization. He gave nearly all his sitters the same easy half-front pose and eliminated any but the most necessary details of costume. One flaw fairly common to his drawing was the lengthening of the neck line; the elongated collar is very nearly a Trott signature. By 1819 the principal change in his style is a broader stroke and more slapdash application. The painterly quality which distinguishes his work from that of the earlier miniaturists, with their engraver technique, became extremely marked in this period. From then on his powers began to decline. In 1828 his stroke was smaller and much constrained. Trott achieved fine clear color, profiting from frequent chemical experiment. Though his transitions and combinations of color were not so subtle as Malbone’s, the effect of naturalness is much the same. Like Malbone he is unmistakably American in his palette. The works of Trott from his best period, around 1805, compare favorably with fine miniature painting in England and France. In his own country half a dozen of his miniatures are excelled only by Malbone’s. About fifty of his miniatures have been identified but none of his oil portraits. Among his sitters were Nicholas Biddle, Robert Morris, Charles Wilkins, and Sally Waln.

[Almost the only source for Trott’s life is William Dunlap, *A Hist. of the Rise and Progress of the Arts of Design in the U. S.* (3 vols., 1918), ed. by F. W. Bayley and C. E. Goodspeed. H. B. Wehle and Theodore Bolton, *Am. Miniatures, 1730-1850* (1927), contains the best modern account and reproduces many of the miniatures. See also *Cat. of an Exhibition of Miniatures . . . 1720-1850* (1927). Metropolitan Museum of Art ; and Jean L. Brockway, in *Antiques*, Aug. 1931, where miniatures not in Wehle and Bolton are reproduced.] J. L. B.