JOHN SMART (British, 1741–1811)

JOHN SMART IS OFTEN REGARDED as the most skilled painter of portrait miniatures at the height of the art form’s popularity in late-eighteenth-century Britain. While the free style and white and blue color palette of his rival Richard Cosway (1742–1821) conjured up the glamour of fashionable society, Smart’s attention to minute detail, saturated colors, and frank conveyance of likeness and character attracted a different type of clientele, one who prized these qualities above Cosway’s homogenized modishness.

Information is limited about Smart’s life and career, so much so that while G. C. Williamson had penned the definitive biographies of Cosway, George Engleheart (1732–1829), and Andrew Plimer (1763–
1837) by 1905, it wasn't until 1964 that a biography of Smart appeared.¹

Little is known about the artist’s early training beyond evidence suggesting that before the age of fourteen, he was winning prizes from the Society of Arts for his drawings and, like Cosway, was an apprentice in William Shipley’s London school in St. Martin’s Lane. Smart exhibited for several years as an active member and eventually president of the Society of Artists of Great Britain before seeking his fortune as a miniature painter in India, where he lived between 1785 and 1795, hoping to secure patronage from wealthy princes and those involved in England’s growing trade market. Works from this period are signed with the initial I, signifying India.

Unlike Cosway, an ostentatious showman, Smart lived and worked quietly, settling in London after his return from India and exhibiting at the Royal Academy. His style, which changed little throughout his career, is characterized by a meticulous description of a sitter’s countenance through the use of delicate stippling, often featuring wrinkles, crow’s feet around the eyes, and a slightly upturned mouth that suggests joviality. Unlike his contemporaries Cosway, Engleheart, and Plimer, whose backgrounds most often featured blue and white cloudy skies, Smart painted his backgrounds in varying shades of browns, greens, and grays. The size of the artist’s miniatures expanded over time, measuring around 1½ inches until about 1775, then 2 inches until around 1790, and 3 inches thereafter.² Though highly sought after in his time, Smart’s work grew even more popular among collectors following his death. The Cleveland Museum of Art has a total of twenty-three portraits by Smart: seven gentlemen sitters painted on ivory and sixteen preparatory drawings of men and women. Of the seven miniatures on ivory, two date from 1770, three from Smart’s years in India, and two after his 1795 return to London.

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² Ibid., p. 50.