

A Portrait of Mrs. Bingley

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On May 21, 1813, Jane Austen and her brother Henry attended the Exhibition of the Society of Painters in Oil and Water-Colours in Spring Gardens. Writing about the visit to her sister Cassandra three days later, Jane Austen revealed that she had found a “small portrait of Mrs. Bingley, excessively like her.” “Mrs. Bingley,” of course, is Jane Bennet of *Pride and Prejudice*, and what Jane Austen had found was a portrait that duplicated her mental image of that fictional character. She went on to describe the portrait in rather close detail: “Mrs. Bingley is exactly herself, size, shaped face, features & sweetness; there never was a greater likeness. She is dressed in a white gown, with green ornaments, which convinces me of what I had always supposed, that green was a favourite colour with her.”¹

There is an attractive possibility that this portrait still exists. Using the catalogue of the exhibition, it has been possible to narrow the number of highly eligible portraits to five: two by the miniaturist and animal painter Jean Francois Marie Huet-Villiers and three by Charles John Robertson. As described in the catalogue, they are:

Huet-Villiers:	No. 3	Portrait of Mrs. Crompton.
	No. 27	Portrait of a Lady.
C. J. Robertson:	No. 15	Portrait of Lady Anderson.
	No. 116	Portrait of Mrs. Clarke, of Weston Place.
	No. 246	Portrait of Lady Nelthorpe.

Two distinctly lesser possibilities are No. 4, “Portrait of Miss Smirnove” by James Stephanoff, and No. 28, “Portrait of a Young Lady” by James Hewlett.²

So far my inquiries to major public collections in Britain and the USA have failed to turn up any of the above paintings, but there is a distinct possibility that they survive in private collections. Robertson’s portrait of Lady Nelthorpe, for example, was owned in 1929 by Mrs. C. B. Prowse, and was described by Basil Long: “It is on ivory, about 7¾ in. x 5¾ in., and is signed at the back *C. J. Robertson, pinxit / Apr: 1813*. It is a ¾ length portrait of a lady seated on a rustic bench in a landscape, with her hat on her lap.... The face is shaded with brown and gray.”³ If the picture of Lady Nelthorpe is any indication, the “small portrait” described by Jane Austen may have been one of the larger rectangular miniatures that came into fashion during the Regency.⁴

The discovery of the portrait of “Mrs. Bingley” would be a major event for Jane Austen enthusiasts and would undoubtedly lend to the portrait itself a significance far beyond its intrinsic aesthetic worth. I should, however, remind the reader, as John Murdoch reminded me, of the “problem of fading. Greens often do not survive as greens, but resolve

under the effects of light into a kind of yellowish brown (sometimes, but not invariably)."⁵ I would also note that Charles John Robertson should not be confused with the more well-known Irish miniaturist, Charles Robertson.

I can only hope that someday this small portrait will be found and identified. It would be gratifying, to say the least, to see the lady in a white gown with green ornaments who completed Jane Austen's conception of Jane Bennet.⁶

NOTES

- ¹ *Jane Austen's Letters to Her Sister Cassandra and Others*, ed. R. W. Chapman, 2nd ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1952), pp. 309-10.
- ² *The Exhibition of the Society of Painters in Oil and Water-Colours. The Ninth*. (London, 1813), p. 3. I describe the portraits by Stephanoff and Hewlett as lesser possibilities because of the implied youth ("Young Lady") and unmarried status ("Miss") of the sitters. At twenty-three, "Mrs. Bingley" would have been, by Jane Austen's standards, neither.
- ³ *British Miniaturists* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1929), p. 369. I have spelled out some of Long's abbreviations.
- ⁴ John Murdoch, Jim Murrell, Patrick J. Noon, and Roy Strong, *The English Miniature* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), p. 197.
- ⁵ Letter, 20 July 1983.
- ⁶ For an expanded discussion of the portrait of Mrs. Bingley and the relationship of Jane Austen's novelistic technique and the visual arts, see Lance Bertelsen, "Jane Austen's Miniatures: Painting, Drawing, and the Novels," *Modern Language Quarterly* 45 (1984), 350-72.



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