The late eighteenth-century emergence of the modern family opened a new era in the history of children. Once viewed as sinful, children were instead identified as inherently good and celebrated in families linked by bonds of affection. In miniatures created to honor beloved children, their forms often fill the frame, reinforcing the sense that the portrait presents a window into a child’s world. With a growing awareness of the transience of each phase of child development, adults treasured the uniqueness of the moments in portable portraits that tenderly recorded their son’s or daughter’s love for a favorite toy or pet. The growth of increasingly private, child-centered families also made loss—so frequent in an era of high mortality rates—harder to bear, contributing to the miniature’s popularity as a token of mourning.

*Not an hour passes in which my cherubs are absent from my mind*  
_Hore Browse Trist in a letter to his wife, 1802_
Unidentified artist

*Boy with a Toy Violin*

ca. 1825

Watercolor on ivory


Attributes in children’s portraits often announce the sitter’s sex: whips, drums, and other boisterous toys indicate males, while flowers, fruit, and other symbols of fertility are usually reserved for girls. However, the violin cradled by the boy in this miniature relates instead to the perception of children as malleable instruments who, through education and nurture, could be “tuned” to develop into adults with desired qualities. Manuals guided parents in orchestrating their children’s upbringing to instill respect for values such as hard work, education, piety, and cultural appreciation. The choice of attribute also relates to a love of music, and the skill and finesse required to play, that this boy’s parents wished to pass onto their son. Violins or fiddles, produced in small sizes for training young fingers, were mainstays of American popular music.
Books were an important source of edification and entertainment for children, whose portraits often depict them reading. By the mid-nineteenth century, children’s literature was often segregated by sex. In addition to instilling piety and imparting general knowledge, girls’ books affirmed nurturing values that would prepare them to become wives and mothers. Education was considered essential training for motherhood and girls were increasingly schooled in practical subjects in addition to sewing, music, and drawing.

Martha Appleton may have been the niece of the artist and her sister, fellow miniaturist Eliza Goodridge.
Eliza Goodridge (1798–1882)

Julia Porter Dwight (1830–1869)

ca. 1832

Watercolor on ivory


Julia Porter Dwight, the great-niece of Yale President Timothy Dwight, was the daughter of a Brooklyn merchant, banker, and proprietor of The New York Daily Advertiser. A letter written in 1832 by Julia’s aunt to her fiancé provides a glimpse of the Dwights’ warm family life: “I wish you could see our parlour. My mother, aunt, cousin, brother, sister, and little niece Julia are all talking, singing and laughing.” In Goodridge’s portrait, Julia plays with a kitten and a toy, possibly a whistle, from her perch on a low stool. Rather than emphasize the size disparity between adult viewers and her child sitter, Goodridge draws us down to Julia’s level, where we meet the sober toddler’s gaze directly. Around this time, play and pets came to be recognized as important factors in child development.
Alfred T. Agate (1812–1846)

*Robert A. Coleman* (1834–1838)

1838

Watercolor on ivory


Agate painted this posthumous portrait of Robert A. Coleman only a month after the three-and-a-half-year-old boy’s death on January 10, 1838. Perhaps to mitigate the tragedy of the young boy’s loss, the artist depicted him in the flush of life, surrounded by flowers and a verdant landscape. Robert’s glowing skin and child-sized whip—a popular toy for teaching children responsibility—suggest that he is a healthy boy at play. Although still dressed in a toddler’s skeleton suit, Robert handles the whip with the confident reserve of the adult into which he would never grow.

Framed like an oil painting, this miniature would have hung on a wall in a family group; however, its small size and delicate stippling would have invited visitors to contemplate the portrait up close, or even to take it down to cradle the child’s image.
Brewster’s portrait of a baby with a coral necklace and a rattle alludes to parents’ desires to both protect and educate their children. Perhaps because of its vibrant red color and ability to harden when removed from water, coral was believed to ward off illness and provide good luck and thus was fashioned into children’s jewelry and teething rattles. This baby’s rattle, which may incorporate a whistle, is metal or ivory. As both tactile and audible toys, rattles stimulated infants’ senses. Attracted more by sight and touch than sound, the deaf Brewster sensitively captures the delicate piercings and the satisfyingly chunky form of his young sitter’s toy.
Unidentified artist

James T. Carroll

c.a. 1830

Watercolor on ivory

Promised Bequest of Davida Tenenbaum Deutsch and Alvin Deutsch, 1958, in honor of Kathleen Luhrs, LIE1999.3.34

The harsh reality of high infant mortality found expression in portrait miniatures of dying or recently deceased children. James’s off-the-shoulder, white shift is a type that often appears in posthumous portraits of children. The garment’s insubstantial weight and pale color suggest its wearer’s youth and innocence. An inset compartment on the reverse of the locket contains a knot of blond hair surrounded by two shades of brown locks, probably joining the parents’ hair with that of their child.
Edward Samuel Dodge (1816–1857)

*Harriet Hulse*

1842

Watercolor on ivory

Promised Bequest of Davida Tenenbaum Deutsch and Alvin Deutsch, L.B. 1958, in honor of Kathleen Luhrs, ILE 1999.3.1

Despite their young age, children also participated in mourning rituals by donning black dresses like that worn by Harriet, perhaps to honor a parent or close relative. The death of a loved one spurred many families to commission miniatures of surviving members, often while they were still in mourning.
Mrs. Moses B. Russell (Clarissa Peters) (1809–1854)

Child in a Pink Dress

ca. 1850

Watercolor on ivory

Promised Bequest of Davida Tenenbaum Deutsch and Alvin Deutsch, l.l.b. 1958,
in honor of Kathleen Luhrs, IIE 1999. 3. 39

Boston-based artist Mrs. Moses B. Russell’s ethereal Child in a Pink Dress is probably a posthumous portrait, indicated by the angelic halo of pink and blue sky surrounding the child’s head. Painted in a style characteristic of American folk art, the sitter’s frontal, fully lit face and large, round eyes—the top lids fringed with clearly delineated lashes—underscore the impression of the child’s vulnerability. Following a tradition of associating childhood innocence with closed blossoms, the girl holds two fragile rosebuds in her hand. Artists used roses at every stage of growth, from buds of hope to mature open flowers, to denote the transience of life.
Glenora Richards (b. 1909)

Tim Richards as a Baby (b. 1941)

1943

Watercolor on ivory

Gift of Timothy and Sheila Richards in honor of Glenora Richards, 1995.30.1

(please see next page)
Glenora Richards (b. 1909)

**Tim Richards as a Young Boy** (b. 1941)

1950

Watercolor on ivory

Gift of Timothy and Sheila Richards in honor of Glenora Richards, 1995.30.2

Much like the annual photographs through which contemporary parents track their children’s growth, these portraits by Glenora Richards of her own son capture him at different stages of development. The oversize image of a wide-eyed baby in coveralls gives way to a portrait of the older boy, its smaller size, darker colors, and profile format adding psychological complexity to her portrayal of a son moving toward young manhood.
The late eighteenth-century emergence of the modern family opened a new era in the history of children. Once viewed as sinful, children were instead identified as inherently good and celebrated in families linked by bonds of affection. In miniatures created to honor beloved children, their forms often fill the frame, reinforcing the sense that the portrait presents a window into a child’s world. With a growing awareness of the transience of each phase of child development, adults treasured the uniqueness of the moments in portable portraits that tenderly recorded their son’s or daughter’s love for a favorite toy or pet. The growth of increasingly private, child-centered families also made loss—so frequent in an era of high mortality rates—harder to bear, contributing to the miniature’s popularity as a token of mourning.
Unidentified artist

Mary Stiles (Mrs. Abiel Holmes) (1767–1795)

1775

Oil on wood, later mounted inside of box lid
Inscribed u.c. “Mary Stiles Ae. 8. 1775”

Gift of Elmer D. Keith, B.A. 1910, 1943.47

This unusual portrait depicts Mary, the daughter of Yale College president Ezra Stiles. Shortly before Mary’s eighth birthday, Stiles wrote that his “pious and good wife has been giving her children her dying counsel and Advice.” In keeping with Mrs. Stiles’s wishes that “her friends should put on no Mourning,” Mary does not wear mourning dress. Painted only a few months after her mother’s death, Mary’s likeness is inscribed with her name, age, and the date. Perhaps her family commissioned it to commemorate her mother’s memory or to celebrate Mary’s survival of a serious illness, an interpretation supported by her shorn hair and the opening rosebud held in her hand. Although a common motif in mourning imagery, a rosebud could also symbolize youth and life.
Unidentified artist

*A Member of the Chauncey Family*

c. 1780–1785

Watercolor on ivory

Bequest of Emily H. Chauncey, 1959.70

This portrait of an unidentified boy of the Chauncey family may depict Norman Chauncey Morrison (1782–1790), whose mother Abigail married widowed Connecticut silversmith Caleb Bull after her first husband’s death. In an era of high mortality rates, eighteenth-century families were frequently shaped by remarriages and deaths of both parents and children.

The boy’s large, open collar and skeleton suit were intended to provide a freedom of movement during play not allowed by earlier frock coats.
Attributed to Mary Way (1769–1833)

Child of the Briggs Family

ca. 1820

Watercolor on ivory

Gift of Mildred S. Prince, 1969.37.3

Off-the-shoulder dresses came into vogue for children of both sexes around 1820. The minimal clothing related to two impulses then current in childrearing—the desire to increase children’s physical stamina by adapting them to cold and the wish to offer them freedom of movement during play. Such chemises sometimes appear in posthumous portraits, underscoring the tender age and innocence of the departed.

In this miniature, the chemise, the exacting profile likeness, and the lock of blond hair set into the locket’s reverse suggest that the child depicted may have been taken from his or her parents too soon. A companion portrait of the child’s mother wearing a black neck ruff indicates that she is in mourning.
Marquise Jean-Françoise-René-Almaire de Bréhan
(Anne Flore Millet)
(France, 1749–1826, active U.S., 1788–1789)

Eleanor (Nelly) Parke Custis (Mrs. Lawrence Lewis) (1779–1852)
on the reverse of George Washington (1732–1799) L.L.D. 1781
1789

Watercolor (grisaille) on ivory
Mabel Brady Garvan Collection, 1947.220

Nelly Custis, the daughter of Martha Washington’s late son John Parke Custis, was, along with her brother, unofficially adopted after their father’s death by the Washingtons. Raising the children of relatives or even friends was commonplace in the early republic, the result of high birth and death rates. Although Nelly still saw her older siblings and mother, the girl wrote of her grandmother, “She has been more than a Mother to me. It is impossible to love anyone more than I love her.”

Bréhan conceived her portrait of ten-year-old Nelly during a November 1788 diplomatic visit to Mount Vernon with her brother-in-law, France’s minister to the United States, and finished it the next year. It was set in a double-sided locket along with that of Nelly’s grandfather (reverse) during his presidency as a token of affection for Martha.
Attributed to John Brevoort (1715–1775)

*Mourning Ring for John Brovort Hicks (1758–1761)*

1761

Gold, crystal, paint and white enamel
Band inscribed “JNO: BROVORT / HICKS: OB: 2 3 /
MARCH: 1 7 6 1 · / AE: 2 : Y : 6 : M.”

Mabel Brady Garvan Collection, 1934.343

Faced with the ever-present possibility that their children, especially infants, would die, family members wore rings bearing images of skeletons or death heads as a way to turn their minds from vanity toward an acceptance of death. Such rings were often distributed to mourners attending a funeral. New York goldsmith John Brevoort crafted this scrolled ring to mourn the untimely death of his two-and-a-half year-old grandson John Brovort Hicks in 1761. Used in rings for children or unmarried women, the white enamel infilling around the gold letters on the band traditionally symbolized purity. By the late eighteenth century, images of sorrowful mourners like those on nearby miniatures would replace skeletons on rings, brooches and lockets, reflecting the new emphasis on lamentation that accompanied the growing enthusiasm for family life celebrated by portrait miniatures.
Unidentified artist, possibly Ezra Ames (1768–1836)

*Memorial for Henry G. Staats*

c. 1802

Watercolor, chopped hair, and graphite pencil on ivory; reverse-glass painting

Lelia A. and John Hill Morgan Collection, 1940.534

The initials “HGS” on the tomb likely belong to Henry Staats, born on January 16, 1802, in Albany, New York. On the reverse, cut-gold initials probably stand for his brother Richard Cuyler, born on July 16, 1800, and remembered by locks of plaits hair. The initials of their mother, Catherine Cuyler Staats, are engraved at the top of the locket’s reverse. While no records of the boys’ deaths have been found, the birth of a son christened Richard Henry in 1803 suggests that his parents bravely named him after his deceased brothers. The figure of a weeping woman dressed in black and partially veiled by willow boughs painted on the lens’s reverse captures the family’s grief at the loss of two young sons.
Unidentified artist

Memorial for S. C. Washington

c.a. 1789

Watercolor, chopped hair, gold wire, pearls and applied ivory on ivory

Promised Bequest of Davida Tenenbaum Deutsch and Alvin Deutsch, îL.B. 1958,
in honor of Kathleen Luhrs, îLE1999.3.18

A mourning miniature of a deceased teenaged girl breaking through an
obelisk to reunite with her distraught mother encapsulates the ultimate
purpose of all miniatures, to hold onto the beloved. More than any other
token of the time, the mourning miniature expressed the universal longing
to keep the dead within the circle of the living. The reverse of the locket
bears an engraved dedication to S.C. Washington, who died at age nineteen
in 1789. Inside the locket, a tiny remnant of a note, probably from the
family who mourned her, instructs the artist on how to memorialize their
daughter. The powerful imagery they chose underscores the family’s desire
for reunion with their lost loved one, evidence of a shift in attitudes in the
late eighteenth century away from the finality of death.
Attributed to John Ramage (Ireland, ca. 1748–1802)

Memorial for Hannah Hodges (1780–1792)

1792

Watercolor and chopped hair on ivory
Engraved on reverse “Hannah Hodges/ OB. 9. OCTr 1792 AE 12”

Lelia A. and John Hill Morgan Collection, 1940.539

Hannah Hodges, the daughter of Captain Benjamin Hodges and Hannah King Hodges, died of consumption in Salem, Massachusetts, in 1792. The words “NOT LOST” inscribed on a tomb beside a soulful flower express her parents’ plaintive wish. Two years after her death, the Hodges honored Hannah’s memory when they welcomed the birth of her namesake. The winged angel’s head at the top of the miniature suggests the fleeting nature of human life, but it also acts as a guardian, watching over young souls on their passage to heaven. During an era when parents faced births with the awareness that new life often meant death, “NOT LOST BUT GONE BEFORE”—a maxim offering consolation on gravestones, mourning miniatures, and in poetically abridged form here—voiced faith in the family’s future reunion.
Unidentified artist

*Memorial for Solomon and Joseph Hays*

1801

Watercolor, pearls, gold wire, beads, and locks of blond and brown hair (natural, chopped, and dissolved) on ivory; on reverse blond and brown hair plaid, gold cipher “H/ JS”

Inscribed on monuments “IN / MEMORY / of SOLM[N] / HAYS / IN INFANT / YEARS / 1798” and “IN / MEMORY / of JOS[H] / HAYS / IN INFANT / YEARS / 1801”

Promised Bequest of Davida Tenenbaum Deutsch and Alvin Deutsch, L.L.B. 1958, in honor of Kathleen Luhrs, ILE 1999.3.21

Allegorical miniatures were so pervasive as tokens of bereavement that, despite their association with Christian belief, some Jewish families also commissioned them—including the Hays family, founding members of Congregation Shearith Israel in New York City. This double memorial perpetuates the memory of two infants, Solomon and Joseph Hays, who died in 1798 and 1801, respectively. The boys probably were the sons of Jacob Hays (1772–1849), New York’s chief of police.

Solomon’s blond hair forms the abstracted willow on the left; Joseph’s brown hair, the one on the right. Chopped and cut blond hair fills the earth below Solomon’s monument and the urn above; brown hair defines Joseph’s place of rest. On the reverse, the brothers’ locks plaited together unite them forever beneath their conjoined initials.
When Maryland lawyer John Beale Bordley sent his sons to England to study, he wrote, “I should be glad the little fellows were led up in a plain manly way not overlooking morals and manners.” Thomas refers to their education by pointing to a line in a book held by Matthias. Their studies are watched over by a bust of Minerva, the Roman goddess of wisdom.

Clothing underscores differences in the boys’ ages. Twelve-year-old Thomas wears full adult dress; ten-year-old Matthias, a child’s neck ruffle. Peale further alluded to Matthias’s youth by depicting his bow askew and a button on his vest undone. Matthias may have unbuttoned his vest to allow his hand to slip underneath, a common posture during dance instruction, considered an essential part of an upper-class boy’s education.
Nathaniel Hancock (active 1792–1809)

Geographer Discoursing to a Group of Ladies on the reverse of Jedidiah Morse (1761–1826), B.A. 1783, M.A. 1786

ca. 1795

Watercolor on ivory

Mabel Brady Garvan Collection, 1935.255

The tiny scene on the reverse of a portrait of the minister and geographer Jedidiah Morse portrays him lecturing to a group of rapt young ladies. In surrounding the geographer with girls, Hancock was positioning Morse in one of the most hotly debated issues in the early republic—women’s education. Morse’s dedication to instructing women in geography reflected a growing consensus that female literacy in certain prescribed fields would serve American nationalism by preparing future mothers to educate the next generation of citizens.
Unidentified artist, possibly Samuel Folwell (1764–1813)

*Maternal Allegory*

c. 1795

Watercolor and chopped hair on ivory

Engraved on reverse “W: Shaw”

1972.140.2

The doting relationship between mother and children in this allegorical miniature reflects their respective positions in the modern, child-centered family that emerged in late eighteenth-century America. The mother’s lecturing of the older boy conveys the contemporary belief that such lessons were the building blocks of early American society. The new perception of children as inherently good is evident in the composition, which recalls depictions of Jesus on the Virgin Mary’s lap attended by the young, standing John the Baptist. The pervasive elevation of children contributed to an expanded social role for women, whose responsibility for their instruction introduced a new reverence for motherhood as a contribution to the nation.
Attributed to J. Miers (England, active 1760–1810)

Family Group Memorial on the reverse of Gentleman

c. 1790

Watercolor on ivory
Inscribed on tomb: “HIS FORM WAS/ VIRTUE AND/ HIS SOUL/ WAS/ TRUTH”
and on urn “C•L”

Promised Bequest of Davida Tenenbaum Deutsch and Alvin Deutsch, IL.B. 1958,
in honor of Kathleen Luhrs, ILE1999.3.48

Although mothers enjoyed new respect by the late eighteenth century for their role in nurturing children, fathers were also cherished in the increasingly affectionate environment of the modern family. Here, six children and their mother grieve the loss of the father and husband pictured in silhouette on the miniature’s reverse. The inscription conveys the moral leadership fathers were expected to provide, a lesson that endures beyond the grave for the children who touch or lean against their father’s tomb.
Unidentified artist

*Mémorial for Werter* on the reverse of *Werter*

c. 1810

Watercolor on ivory

Promised Bequest of Davida Tenenbaum Deutsch and Alvin Deutsch, L.I.B. 1958, in honor of Kathleen Luhrs, ILE1999.3.44

The presence of a young girl domesticates this mourning scene in which Charlotte bows her head over the tomb of Werther, the central character in German poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s *The Sufferings of Young Werther*. The 1774 novel caused a cultural sensation, catapulting Werther—anglicized as Werter—into a cult figure whose unrequited love for Charlotte and eventual suicide were perceived as the ultimate embodiment of Romantic values. Images from the story were replicated in literature, needlework patterns, and miniatures, whose associations with romantic longing made them an ideal format. In this scene, the artist’s inclusion of a child may address criticisms that women’s reading of novels like *Werther* encouraged them to waste their emotions upon romantic obsessions rather than channeling them into the rearing of children.