Treasurer Johan Gottlob Brusell, by the Swedish painter Peter Adolf Hall, is one of the most valued portrait miniatures in the Paul and Fanny Sinebrychoff Collection. The work is marked with an indistinct signature and the date 1783/5 on the right-hand side.

Paul Sinebrychoff bought the miniature in 1904 from his distant relatives, the Falkman family of Sweden. It had been in the possession of the family for several generations. In his correspondence with Bukowski, Sinebrychoff mentioned that he was fascinated by the miniature and sent a photograph of it for evaluation. Dr. Palm, from the Bukowski auction house, thanked him cordially for the photograph and praised the beauty of the piece, noting that there was a similar painting in a Swedish collection. It has since been discovered that several versions of the miniature were made, which begs the question, why so many versions?

When Paul Sinebrychoff bought the miniature, it was presumed to be a portrait of Carl Michael Bellman, Sweden’s national poet, which would explain the numerous versions. The questions of whether the subject is of similar appearance and age as Bellman and whether or not Hall and Bellman ever met, remained unanswered for decades. The truth was not revealed until the early 1900s as the result of research by the Danish art historian Torben Holck Colding.

The subject proved to be Johan Gottlob Brusell, as indicated by an inscription discovered on the reverse of a miniature in a collection in Copenhagen. Written in ink, the text read: ‘Kamereraren vid Museum Brusells portrait målad af Hall i Paris’ (‘Portrait of Museum Treasurer Brusell painted by Hall in Paris’). This attribution is confirmed by the fact that Johan Brusell had visited Paris around 1783. There has never been any doubt regarding the artist. The miniature is an example of Peter Adolf Hall’s work at its most typical and is one of his best works.

Brusell is shown without a wig, wearing a silk waistcoat and a white shirt with an open neck. The clothing is familiar from many contemporary artist portraits, including Bellman, among others. The attire is executed with consummate brushwork, rapidly yet with total command. The colours – the refined blue-grey of the waistcoat, the white of the shirt and the warm skin tones of the face and neck – reveal the artist’s mastery of colour. The face exudes an almost child-like benevolence, crystallising the artist’s nuanced aesthetic sense.

Johan Gottlob Brusell (1756–1829) was a decorative painter at the Royal Theatre in Stockholm. In 1826 he was put in charge of the collections of the Royal Museum in Stockholm (garde des tableaux). Brusell, however, died poor and forgotten, leaving only eight small oil paintings, which were badly damaged and lacking frames.

1 Carlén 1861. Provenance attributed to the clothing merchant Carl Ahrens 1861 is uncertain.
2 This was in the collection of the wholesaler Setterwall. The work was kept in the family, and is known to have been in Gothenburg in 1950.
3 At least seven different works are known.
5 Ibid.
Peter Adolf Hall, on the other hand, became one of the most popular miniaturists of the period. Before this, however, he had followed his father’s wishes and enrolled at the University of Uppsala in 1753 to study medicine and natural history. In connection with his studies, he was given the opportunity to travel abroad, which awakened his interest in drawing and painting.

On returning to Sweden, Hall immediately decided to specialise in portraiture and was admitted to the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Stockholm to study under Pierre-Hubert Larchéveque and Gustaf Lundberg. At the age of 27, Hall received commissions from the Swedish court, and in the same year a stipend enabling him to visit Paris, where his style of painting developed in a completely different direction. In just three years, he became a leading miniaturist.

As if in recognition of his skills, he was appointed to the French Academy of Fine Arts and came to be known as ‘Peintre du Roi’ (‘Painter to the King’). Alexander Roslin belonged to Hall’s close circle of friends and presented the younger Swedish colleague to the French art world.

The French Revolution was an economic disaster for the artist. His clients disappeared, and those who were able to save themselves went to Brussels. In 1791, Hall also travelled to Brussels in hope of securing work, but after two years of setbacks he died, separated from his family, in Liège.

Both the lack of work and the dwindling popularity of miniatures had weighed from time to time oppressively on the artist, who felt these works to be a limitation on his own creativity. He found an outlet for these sentiments in oil paintings and pastel works in larger format. Not all of these larger works have been identified, as Hall’s reputation is based on his miniatures. The leading miniature expert Léo R. Schidlof mentions Peter Adolf Hall to be in his opinion a forerunner of Impressionism.

Sources

Samlade skrifter af Carl Michael Bellman, 1861. Utlgiven av Johan Gabriel Carlén, I, XXX.
Paul Sinebrychoff’s inventory of miniatures.