

Press release | January 2026

FOR YOUR EYES ONLY Miniatures from the Romantic Era

6 February to 7 June 2026

Press conference: Thursday, 5 February 2026, 11 a.m.

Opening: Thursday, 5 February 2026, 7 p.m.

With *FOR YOUR EYES ONLY. Miniatures from the Romantic Era*, the Hamburger Kunsthalle is presenting the first major exhibition devoted to the multifaceted art of miniature painting in Hamburg, from its heyday circa 1800 to the 1840s, when it was replaced by early photography. These miniature portraits, usually measuring around 6 to 10 cm and artfully painted in watercolour and gouache on wafer-thin ivory plates, backed in some cases with silver foil, still fascinate us even today. A total of over 250 objects will be on view.

The show is based on portrait miniatures from the Kunsthalle's own collection that were restored and catalogued in 2023–24. Around 60 of these miniatures will be shown for the first time here, together with some 200 works on loan from European and private collections, some of them also making their public debut.

These small portraits set in frames, brooches or cases were among the most personal and intimate likenesses people had painted of themselves. They were intended only for the eyes of the recipient and could be worn – often directly over the heart – and viewed at will. The portraits were a way to keep memories alive in the event of a long separation or to provide comfort after the loss of a loved one.

Portrait miniatures were widespread in Europe around 1800. Often made for the nobility, they also became popular with the aspiring bourgeoisie – including in Hamburg, which experienced an economic boom in the late eighteenth century that impacted the art world. Private collections were formed, the Kunstverein was founded, and exhibitions, liberal auction laws and new techniques such as the daguerreotype and lithography contributed to Hamburg's emergence as an important art centre. Internationally renowned miniaturists such as Domenico Bossi and Pierre-Louis Bouvier lived and worked for a time in the Hanseatic city, which itself produced outstanding artists including Heinrich Jacob Aldenrath, Friedrich Carl Gröger, and Ferdinand and Caroline Stelzner.

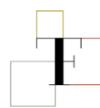
Curators: Sabine Zorn (Head of Conservation/Restoration of Graphic Art and Photography, Hamburger Kunsthalle); Guest Curator: Dr. Bernd Pappe (freelance restorer and art historian specialising in portrait miniatures)

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Friedrich Carl Gröger (1766–1838)
Self-portrait, ca. 1800
Watercolour and gouache on ivory,
7.1 x 5.3 cm
Hamburger Kunsthalle
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Photo: Birgitt Schmedding

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