

Serov P.E., candidate of pedagogical sciences, associate professor of the department of drawing and painting of the Russian university of traditional art crafts, 191186, Saint-Petersburg, Griboyedov canal embankment, 2, lit. A., e-mail: serov_p@mail.ru

Development of professional skills through execution of small-format studies in the field of lacquer miniature painting

Abstract. The article is devoted to investigating the impact of executing small-format painting studies on enhancing the professional skills of students studying lacquer miniature painting. The main objective lies in analyzing approaches that facilitate the integration of academic knowledge and practical skills during the training process for lacquer miniature painting students. By employing a methodology based on performing studies from nature, the author explores how this approach contributes to developing analytical thinking, technical precision and creative interpretation of artistic imagery.

Keywords: lacquer miniature, small-format study, professional skills, artistic thinking, technological literacy, integration of theory and practice, traditional art crafts, educational methodologies.

The contemporary sociocultural environment is characterized by an increasing interest in preserving and developing Russia's traditional cultural heritage. In the context of modern educational processes, there arises a need to enhance students' professional skills through various methodologies that promote comprehensive development of their creative potential [3, p. 11].

The relevance of this study stems from the necessity to identify effective pedagogical approaches that not only improve the technique of creating small-format painting sketches but also contribute to the formation of aesthetic taste, analytical abilities and the skill of interpreting traditional artistic motifs within a contemporary context. The aim of the research is to investigate the influence of executing small-format studies on the development of professional skills among students studying lacquer miniature painting.

Improving the professional skills of students studying lacquer miniature painting through the creation of small-format painting studies represents a complex challenge encompassing diverse aspects of forming artistic thinking and technological literacy aimed at preparing future miniaturist artists.

Implementing an integrative approach in professional art education, particularly in the field of traditional art crafts, is a key condition for overcoming the gap between theoretical knowledge, technological proficiency and creative thinking of students.

Interdisciplinary connections at the level of higher education are regarded by many researchers as an effective pedagogical method contributing to the formation of learners' holistic view of the world and the development of universal

competencies.

In the area of traditional art crafts, N.M. Aleksandrova notes that integration has been one of the central ideas implemented in vocational education for several years. She identifies a set of integrative methodological approaches applied in professional education in the sphere of traditional art crafts: regional-historical, artistic-technological, integrative-modular, invariant-variable, practice-oriented and interdisciplinary.

The artistic-technological approach, in particular, establishes a connection between the artistic and technological activities of students, emphasizing the compatibility of their practical acquisition. It is precisely within this framework that the integration of painting techniques into teaching lacquer miniatures finds its justification. The validity of using small-format studies is confirmed by the classification of integrative approaches proposed by N.M. Aleksandrova [1, p. 41]. Performing studies in a small-format contributes to the implementation of a practice-oriented approach aimed at successful mastery of knowledge, skills and abilities.

Academic painting, as a discipline grounded in direct observation of nature, develops visual accuracy, coloristic literacy and plastic form analysis skills (Fig. 7).

An academic approach to completing painted studies from life involves the following steps:

- distribution of detail intensity — objects closer to the viewer receive more detailed treatment [2];
- emphasis on primary elements with generalization of secondary ones – clear highlighting of focal points while softening peripheral areas;
- creation of spatial depth – achieved through contrast between foreground clarity and background blurriness.

The academic and small-format study complement each other in educational practice and are successfully utilized in the training of miniature painters who master various means of expression.

At the core of the unique stylistics of lacquer miniature painting lies the synthesis of iconographic technical and stylistic methods combined with compositional structure, secular thematic narratives, figural movements inherited from academic painting.

Artists working in lacquer miniature painting create artistic images not directly from nature but rather relying on visual memory, artistic imagination and thoroughly studied sources. An academic study from nature serves as such a source of information when drawing a small-format sketch. Through this exercise, students acquire the ability to work from memory and mental representation, supported by collected observational material.

Traditional themes in lacquer miniature painting include scenes and images that are difficult or impossible to accurately reproduce either from nature or in staged compositions (historical and religious events, fairy-tale and epic subjects, scenes from folk life).

Given the necessity to ensure historical and cultural authenticity, students conduct thorough preliminary research: they execute studies from nature, study literary and folklore sources, historical illustrations, old engravings, collections of

costumes and decorative-applied art items. This gathered material forms the foundation for creating artistically convincing and stylistically accurate compositions. If an artist lacks personal experience or immediate memories related to the subject he intends to depict, he delves deeper into the research process, enabling him to correctly convey all necessary details and nuances of the epoch or folkloric context. The skill of collecting and utilizing materials for producing works of lacquer miniature painting is developed through the process of working on small-format painting studies.

Since the late sixteenth century and up until the twentieth century, an established method emerged in artistic practice where a painter would first create an empirical “bank of visual data”: he executed studies of human figures, costume elements, landscape and architectural backgrounds and recorded characteristic typologies and expressive poses in albums. Subsequently, already in the studio setting, the artist relied on these observations, activating associative memory and creative imagination, to synthesize the visual material comprehensively, resulting in a unified composition. Creating an artistic image required not only a high level of visual memory but also the capacity to mentally reconstruct and supplement natural impressions. Unsurprisingly, academic curricula included special exercises aimed at developing memory, focused on systematically training the ability to reproduce objects from mental representations, which in turn formed the basis for subsequent creative experiments among students.

As a result of practicing small-format studies, students develop the skill of independently creating an artistic image based on existing visual experiences and acquired knowledge. This ability is directly linked to the development of compositional thinking: being able to mentally structure a composition signifies thinking creatively in terms of visual imagery.

Teaching experience with students studying miniature painting shows that activities based on visual memory do not oppose direct drawing from nature but, instead, naturally arise from it and require systematic reinforcement through empirical observations. Therefore, the formation of a fully-fledged miniature painter implies unity of these two operations: the initial stage is characterized by detailed investigation of objective reality, followed by its creative transformation. Thus, the described unity of two types of assignments (academic and small-format study) ensures maximum educational effect: the student acquires both technical competence, enhanced observational skills and the ability to implement ideas independently of having a visual prototype. It follows that the didactic value of small-format painting exercises lies in preparing the learner for independent creative activity, shaping him/her as a researcher who thinks in categories of color and form, rather than as a passive copier of reality. This, in turn, determines the status of this assignment as an indispensable link in the academic system of art education. Within the framework of an academic art school, direct study of nature is inextricably linked to systematic work with preparatory visual materials (academic studies, sketches, drawings), forming a unified methodology in which both components mutually complement and reinforce each other. Integration of direct observation, analytical reproduction based on nature studies and memorization ensures verisimilitude,

compositional integrity and thematic richness of lacquer miniature paintings.

A small-format painting study is a miniature-sized academic painting task performed by a student not directly from nature but based on previously created academic studies from nature and compiled visual materials (sketches, drafts, reproductions). It acts as a bridge between academic schooling and the technological techniques and style of lacquer miniature painting, requiring precise scaling of shapes, a high degree of detailing, intense coloring and decorative stylization. Consequently, it fosters the skills of visual memory, compositional thinking and technical expertise in a miniature painter.

Training sessions on small-format painting involve the following stages:

1. *Introductory analytical block* – lecture-presentation of the task, analysis of methodological examples and establishment of quality criteria; the instructor explains how to maintain proportions, detail and coloration when reducing the format size;

2. *Organization of work space and materials* – preparation of work tables, selection of cardboards, grounds, tempera palette, brushes of different sizes and auxiliary optical instruments (magnifying glass if needed);

3. *Demonstration-technological presentation* – step-by-step demonstration by the instructor of base preparation, sequence of painting layers and principles of stylization;

4. *Independent practical work under instructor's supervision* – the student applies the entire algorithm for executing a small-format painting study, making adjustments according to ongoing feedback;

4.1 *Preparatory stage and drawing transfer* – scaling down the academic study, precise transfer of contours onto cardboard, application of groundwork to enhance color saturation;

4.2 *Underpainting* ('*Podmalyovok*') – generalized resolution of basic tonal-color relationships using opaque strokes or transparent color overlay;

4.3 *Glazing layers* – sequential application of thin transparent paint layers to deepen colors and model volume;

4.4 *Detailing and form modeling* – meticulous rendering of fine details, accentuation with highlights, use of opaque pigments in light areas;

4.5 *Generalization and decorative stylization* – softening overly sharp details, evening out texture, intensifying ornamental and color accents in the style of lacquer miniature;

5. *Collective and individual analysis of results* – expert evaluation, identification of errors, planning further exercises; development of professional reflection skills;

6. *Final finishing and archiving* – protective varnishing, signing, photography for portfolio compilation.

The main stages of creating a small-format still-life interior painting study, illustrating the sequence of task execution, can be traced through the example of

a specific student's work (Fig. 1–8³³). Dividing the process into stages (underpainting → glazing → detailing → generalizing) provides a systematic way to master complex techniques, maintains strict technological discipline in handling materials and guarantees achieving artistic coherence and expressiveness in small-format painting studies.

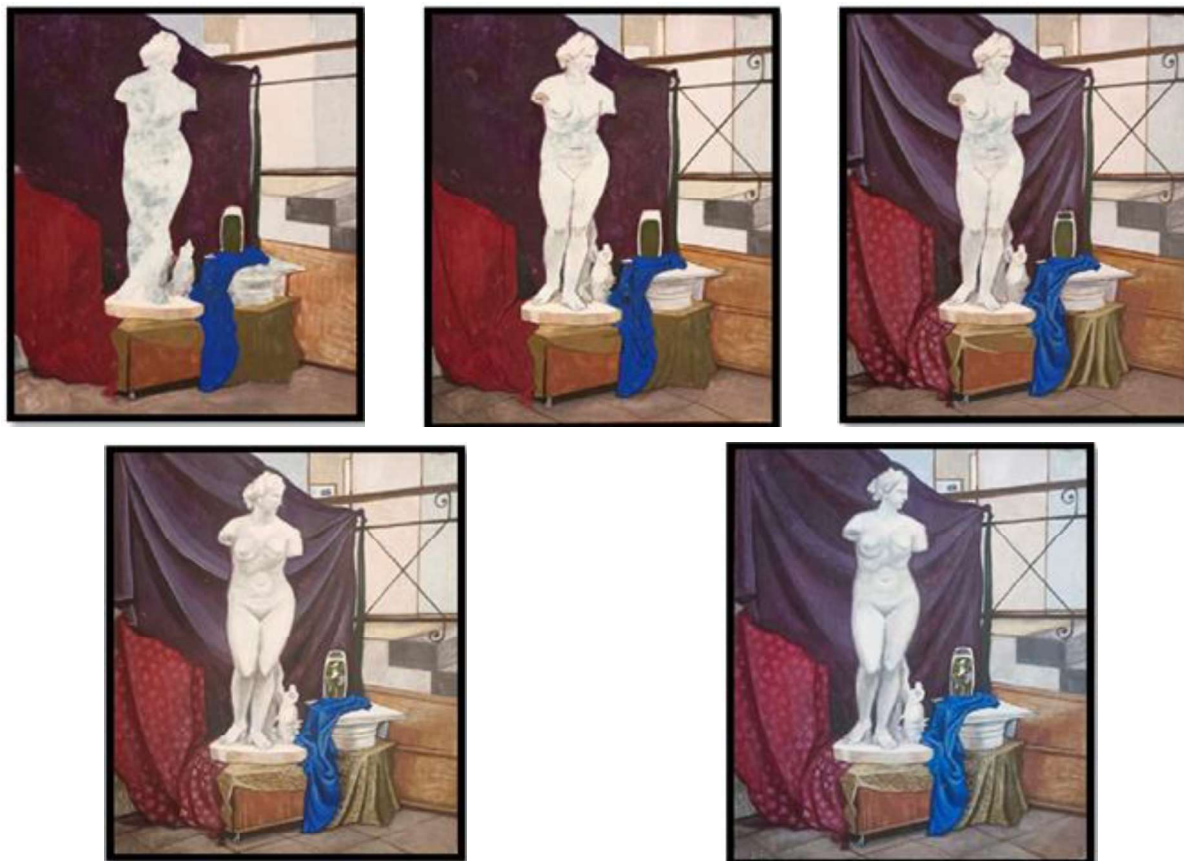


Fig. 1–5. Panfilets P.R., specialty program student, year IV.
Stages of small-format study execution

After transferring the drawing onto the board and applying a primer to enhance color saturation, the next stage is underpainting, i.e., laying down the first layers of tempera paint to define the major color spots of the future painting. Underpainting is a generalized solution of the main tonal and color relations; at this stage, the local color of objects or background is determined, applied both as covering strokes and by glazing technique [4, p. 105]. Next comes careful rendering of the subjects in the painting study, working out fine details and highlighting key form-defining folds. Intermediate tones and first layers of gaps are applied using glazing technique. Glazing is a multilayered painting technique in which thin transparent layers of paint are applied to a well-dried underpainting [4, p. 107]. The final stage includes applying highlights to illuminated parts of the form to enhance its expressiveness and give it volume.

During the detailing phase, paint is usually applied with denser brushstrokes.

³³ Figs. 1-8. Photos from the archive of the department of drawing and painting at the Russian university of traditional art crafts.

Opaque pigments and white paint are used for lighter areas and the consistency of the paint varies from thick to medium.

Students are taught the importance of modeling minute fragments of the image: initially learning to see and plan the overall composition, then progressively “delve” into details without losing the integrity of the image. Modeling, representing the concluding stage of work on a painting study, constitutes the most challenging and responsible phase of the artistic process. Based on the system of chiaroscuro relationships, this technique serves as a fundamental tool for conveying plastic relief and creating the illusion of tangible objectivity of depicted forms. Modeling, in essence, is a specialized technology for visualizing light and shadow, demanding strict correspondence between the coloristic solution of the applied pigment and the characteristics of the light source. The chromatic content of every modeled plane is dictated by the directionality of the light flow and its spectral features, ensuring optical perception of volumetricity and spatial credibility of the depicted object [5, p. 122].

Teachers instruct students in special techniques for simulating textures: for instance, hatching and stippling for fur depiction, smooth glazes for silk, tiny highlight dots for metal shine. Among the most important traditional detailing techniques are stroke, hatch mark and retouching with a brush. It is noted that the student should pay significant attention to texturing different materials – this not only enriches the visual image but also enhances technique and expands the repertoire of painting methods. A small-format painting study and lacquer miniature are viewed close-up, necessitating utmost drawing accuracy, advanced painting technique and completeness of the image.

The final stage of executing a small-format study is generalization. Generalization entails softening overly harsh details that detract from the overall cohesion of the study.

A key skill developed during the execution of a small-format painting study is the precise scaling of the image in miniature format without distortion. Faces, landscapes or patterns must appear harmonious, reduced replicas of reality, gradually cultivating a “sense of scale” [8, p. 11].

Educational tasks involving the creation of small-format painting studies equip miniature painters with comprehensive professional knowledge. Let's examine what objectives are addressed through some sample educational topics.

A small-format still life incorporating a plaster cast of a human head (Fig. 6) helps to work with volume and texture in a miniature format. The plaster cast requires precise analysis of shape and shading, allowing the artist to master the depiction of three-dimensionality on a flat surface. Additionally, this exercise develops the ability to combine monochromatic elements (plaster head) with colored ones (still life), honing skills in tone and color usage for rendering shadows and highlights, gradually building up tonal relationships to achieve the impression of form volume. The work is carried out on black-primed cardboard covered with lacquer.



Fig. 6. Smirnova D.E., specialty program student, year IV.
Small-format still life incorporating plaster cast of human head

This small-format still life featuring a plaster cast of a human head addresses a range of interconnected educational and methodological challenges aimed at developing the student's comprehensive professional vision and practical skills in miniature painting. Compositionally, the student focuses on the matte white form of the bust, balancing it with the diagonal axis of the violin and creating a stable triangular structure, where the candle and decorative vessel serve as additional accents, establishing a rhythmic hierarchy of details. Simultaneously, volume is modeled: subtle gradations of halftones on the plaster surface demonstrate mastery of light-and-shadow rendering techniques, maintaining a coherent sense of form without compromising structural clarity. The varied textures of the setup – a combination of smooth plaster, lacquered wood, metallic alloy, dense book paper and velvety drapery – require differentiated painting language, involving the use of transparent and opaque layers, glazes and form modeling. This process develops the ability to convey the materiality of objects at a reduced scale.

The coloristic task is resolved through juxtaposing the warm ocher-brown spectrum of the draping and instrument against the cool ultramarine background, creating a harmonious warm-cool balance and simultaneously emphasizing spatial depth due to gradual reduction of contrasts in the distant planes. Linear and aerial perspective are practiced through the example of foreshortened surfaces of the violin, books and box, along with the gentle decrease of contrasts in the shadow

behind the bust, thus deepening the student's understanding of constructive rules for arranging objects in space. Working in a small format while retaining recognizable small details – the buttons on the bust's suit, fabric creases, delicate reflections on metal – demonstrates confident command of miniaturization techniques without fragmenting the overall spot (work format 15 x 20 cm).

The final outcome demonstrates a balanced achievement between academic precision of form and decorative wholeness of color solution, reflecting the student's readiness for more complex tasks in lacquer miniature painting. However, minor flaws identified in linear perspective of the object plane and localized losses of saturation in deep shadows indicate directions for further improvement regarding subtle color correction and constructional accuracy.

Through the course of work, students refine their skills in handling art materials (pencil, tempera paints), accurately capturing proportions and freely managing glazing and brushstroke techniques. Lacquer miniature painting is a traditional art craft where silhouettes play a crucial role. Educators introduce the concept of "*spot*" – a silhouette spot of a single-tone object. During the execution of a small-format still life, students learn to perceive the study as groups of color spots – a vital skill for composing intricate scenes in miniature.

Let's consider the peculiarities of executing a small-format study of a female figure dressed in Russian national costume in an interior setting (such a motif is widely represented in lacquer miniature painting).

Small-format painting study of a female figure in Russian national costume in an interior setting: uniform elaboration of all elements, detailing of costume ornamentation, stylistic adaptation aligned with the techniques of a specific traditional art craft. Stylization is a technique that allows maintaining the expressiveness of an image despite its reduced scale. Teachers emphasize that students understand: stylization does not mean simplification to primitivism, but rather selecting the essential elements and enhancing them through artistic means.

A small-format painting study of a female figure in Russian national costume in an interior setting assumes uniform elaboration of all elements. Unlike the academic approach with its selective emphasis on element detail, in a small format, equal attention is given to every part of the composition. This feature is conditioned by the specificity of small-format studies associated with lacquer miniature painting, where each element is visually significant (Fig. 8). Executing a small-format study, the student combines the plasticity of the figure with the distinctiveness of the national costume, working with silhouettes, ornaments, typical poses, integrating them into the surroundings. The miniature scale demands flawless, sharp and lively characterization of the image, expressiveness of form and delicacy of detail. The result is a complete image immediately recognized as authentic [9, p. 4].

Lacquer miniature paintings are characterized by a high degree of refinement of all elements, including figures, clothing, ornaments, surrounding objects and background settings. Even secondary elements are rendered with the same level of attention as the main ones, providing density, richness and decorative coherence to the image [10, p. 12].

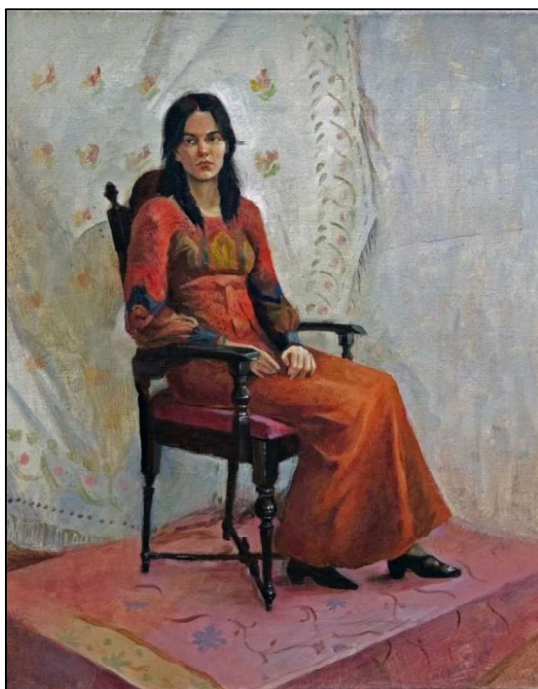


Fig. 7. Perevozchikova S.G., Specialty program student, year IV. Academic study of female figure in Russian national costume in interior setting.

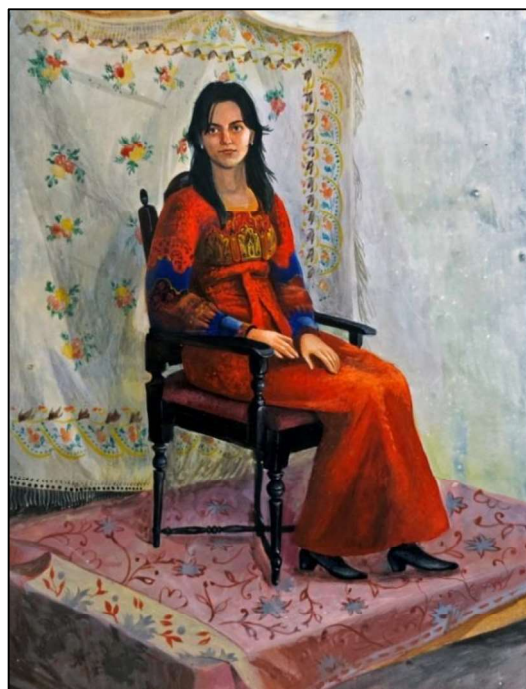


Fig. 8. Perevozchikova S.G., Specialty program student, year IV. Small-format study of a female figure in Russian national costume in an interior setting.

Unlike academic painting, ornaments in lacquer miniatures are not simplified but become expressive carriers of style, mood and visual rhythm of the composition. This creates a sensation of a "uniform decorative carpet", enhancing the textural richness of the work. Fabric elements, embroideries, carpets and interior objects are detailed just as carefully as the figure itself.

A small-format painting study serves as an efficient tool for developing professional skills in thorough analysis of compositional and coloristic solutions since its limited dimensions focus attention on the most significant elements of the image. This process is driven by the necessity to construct complex coloristic relationships within restricted formats, which demands profound comprehension of principles governing the distribution of visual elements [6, p. 6].

The miniature scale of the image imposes specific requirements on coloristic decisions, primarily concerning the use of bright and highly saturated pigments. Often, small-format studies exhibit reduced luminosity, neutralization of color tones and dryness of color scheme. This phenomenon results from transferring methods suitable for mid-size painting into a fundamentally different scale category. When physical dimensions are reduced, the visual activity of the image predictably diminishes and compensation for this effect is achieved solely through intensification of color resonance, endowing the image with necessary liveliness. Color perception physics illustrates that large color fields retain visual impact even with moderate pigment intensity, whereas small-format color patches require significantly increased tone strength relative to standard norms to achieve comparable expressiveness.

This objective requirement for high levels of color saturation and brightness

directly conditions the demand for exceptional transparency of the applied paint materials. Palette formation for small-format painting should be based on rigorous selection of transparent and glazing pigments because the use of opaque or semi-transparent paints inevitably leads to a visual effect of discoloration, increased visual density and dullness of color tone. Given the specific mode of perceiving small-format works through close, detailed examination, freshness and purity of the paint layer assume critical significance. High-quality small-format painting achieves true mastery only when it visually resembles the optically pure surface of precious stones (in miniature, inserts made of mother-of-pearl and painting on gold leaf are often employed to achieve this effect), possessing similar characteristics of luminosity, tone purity and overall decorative appeal that draw attention to the principal elements of the composition [5, p. 123].

The cumulative evidence presented – improved academic performance, fewer structural mistakes, faster acquisition of technical skills – allows us to conclude logically that incorporating small-format painting studies into a structured learning chain ("observation from nature → miniaturization of motive") is a reliable tool for nurturing highly qualified specialists in traditional art industries. This approach ensures a sustainable combination of technical precision, coloristic culture and compositional flexibility [8, p. 5].

Executing small-format painting studies involves acquiring specific methods of working with materials, which requires learners to have a deep understanding of the physical and chemical properties of paints, primers, egg emulsion and diluents. This aspect is a crucial factor in developing professional competencies, as knowledge of material properties and the ability to apply them properly affect the achievement of high precision and aesthetic expressiveness in small-format images.

Another important aspect is the impact of small-format studies on the development of analytical thinking inherent in future miniature painters. Working on an image requires students to cultivate the ability to quickly and accurately determine key compositional elements, stemming from the necessity to establish a strong connection between theoretical concepts about constructing an image and practical skills of precise execution.

Practical experience in executing studies indicates that students undertaking this task show noticeable improvements in their ability to analyze and synthesize information about visual elements, leading to the formation of professionally valuable skills [7, p. 10].

A small-format painting study holds substantial methodological significance, functioning both in the educational context and in professional artistic practice. Within the pedagogical process, it performs a comprehensive instructional function: systematic work on small-format painting studies forms and develops key skills such as:

- skill to independently create an artistic image based on available visual experience and knowledge;
- skill to scale the image, conveying the actual scale of the depicted object despite its physically small format;
- skill to achieve a high degree of detail and form modeling;

- skill to form a distinctive scalability of color relationships within the confined space of the image;
- skill to decoratively stylize the image in alignment with the unique stylistics of lacquer miniature painting.

Functionally, a small-format painting study serves as a connecting link between painting and lacquer miniature, offering an effective toolset for visualizing and revealing the artistic design of the intended product. Such a comprehensive approach to developing students' professional skills through executing small-format painting studies lays a solid foundation for consistent enhancement of professional proficiency, where technical virtuosity is inherently connected with the depth of artistic conception and its impeccable realization.

Considering the above, we can assert that improving the professional skills of students studying lacquer miniature painting through the execution of small-format studies represents a multifaceted phenomenon encompassing both technical execution features and issues of organizing the educational process in the realm of traditional art crafts.

Execution of small-format painting studies indicates that achieving high results is possible only within a comprehensive educational system. In such a system, theory and practice are inseparably linked and complement each other. Furthermore, it is crucial to have modern material and technical support and a competent faculty. This very complex of conditions is decisive for developing creative abilities and technical skills of future miniature painters, which, in turn, is of paramount importance for preserving and further advancing Russia's cultural heritage in today's context.

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