



BLISS HOUSE COLLECTION History Gallery

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It's hard not to feel the warm glow of nostalgia during the holiday season, when traditions which have been passed down through generations are once again celebrated with loved ones and friends. For those who celebrate Christmas and Hanukkah, this time of year also brings swells of generosity, manifesting in kind deeds, thoughtful words, and considerate gifts to warm the heart and home. For children, the anticipation surrounding these holidays fosters joyous life-long memories of hopes and wishes made true. The "Dream Toy" for children changes as they grow and has evolved with each new generation – but one toy has managed to remain as popular now, as ever: the dollhouse.

Once one of the most coveted objects of play, the dollhouse came gloriously marching into the homes of the middle class thanks to the Industrial Revolution. Mass-production made toys affordable, and children all across Europe and America would soon be found gazing longingly at the dog-eared pages of toy catalogs. In America, one of the most successful toy companies of its day was the R. Bliss Manufacturing Co., established in 1832, whose iconic dollhouses and toys have now become cherished pieces of museums and private collectors from all over the world. Here at The Mini Time Machine Museum, we are fortunate enough to have eight Bliss buildings in our collection – six houses, one stable, and one cabin – as well as two sets of Bliss ABC Furniture.



Large Bliss House. R. Bliss Manufacturing Co. ca early 1900s. Detail of Bliss marking above the main entry pediment. Bliss Catalog No. 574. History Gallery. Photograph by Emily Wolverton.

The iconic beauty and durability of Bliss dollhouses have been written about with great admiration by many historians and collectors. The late, great Dougless Strickland Bitler wrote on more than one occasion of their



Large Bliss House. R. Bliss Manufacturing Co. ca early 1900s. Bliss Catalog No. 574. History Gallery. Photograph by Amy Haskell.

enduring fame, with much affection. In her article, "Pure Bliss," written in 1996 for *Miniature Collector*, Strickland tells the tale of how a company founded to create piano screws eventually became a powerhouse in the toy manufacturing world.¹ "It all began in Pawtucket, Rhode Island, when Rufus Bliss established his namesake company in 1832," she writes.² Rufus retired from the business in 1863, but the company continued to use his appealing name as their brand. Even so, the Bliss company did not begin making toys until 1871, and did not make their first dollhouse until 1889,³ but by the turn of the century their dollhouses were in demand. The company mimicked the production method of the wildly sought after Gottschalk dollhouses of Germany, applying brightly colored and detailed lithographed paper over a simple wooden structure, giving the illusion of an elaborate architectural frame using only minimalistic components. The simplicity of the design is what made them so

economical to produce, and yet the variety and whimsy of the pieces are remarkable. Bliss houses are fantastically colorful and mix-matched, often featuring siding materials of stone, clapboards, shingles and brick all in one house, with a host of colors. The houses appear to be storybook illustrations come to life, so cheerful it was as though they were designed by the children, themselves. Many Bliss houses were produced for multiple catalogs, with slight variations in the color and design of the lithograph papers – creating a real treat for modern-day collectors. Each Bliss house has a three-digit number hidden somewhere in the design, revealing its catalog number as well as re-print variation, where applicable (for example, 573-F). The only exception to this rule is the *Adirondack Cabin* (ca. 1910), which although widely accepted by historians as Bliss, is unmarked with neither name nor number.⁴

Bliss houses ran the gamut in size and shape, going from basic, flat and foldable small cottages, to large and magnificent three-story homes. Strickland describes the array of variation, noting the “fashionable architectural details like balconies, porches, pediments and the admired Victorian gingerbread trims. Some houses had turned wood porch posts and lithographed wooden porch railings; others had squared posts with lithographed designs and metal railings.”⁵ The houses had dormers, attics, chimneys, and multiple openings for playtime accessibility. Another important feature of the Bliss house was the wood, itself: the company only used seasoned wood, which prevented warping over time, as well as actual nails instead of glue, two facts which have allowed these houses to survive in remarkable shape well into the 21st century.⁶ The lithographed paper itself is no exception in Bliss durability, with its bright colors outlasting the properties of paint, which becomes brittle and chips away over time.

In spite of it all, perhaps the real joy of a Bliss house can be found in its imperfections – the worn spots, stains, and broken hinges. These are the tell-tale signs of a house that was loved by a child, and not merely an object that managed to survive the passage of time. We appreciate these dollhouses for the stories that they share with us, linking us to the innocence of another age. They remind us that childhood is precious, and that the magic of play is timeless and universal. It is not difficult to imagine the long-forgotten faces of the children who received a Bliss house as a gift, their eyes glowing with eager excitement. We feel a bond with those children every time we stand back and admire these fine, old houses. Truly, we love Bliss for the bliss they brought to so many.

Emily Wolverton
The Mini Time Machine Museum of Miniatures



Bliss Adirondack Cabin. R. Bliss Manufacturing Co. ca 1910. History Gallery. Photograph by Amy Haskell.



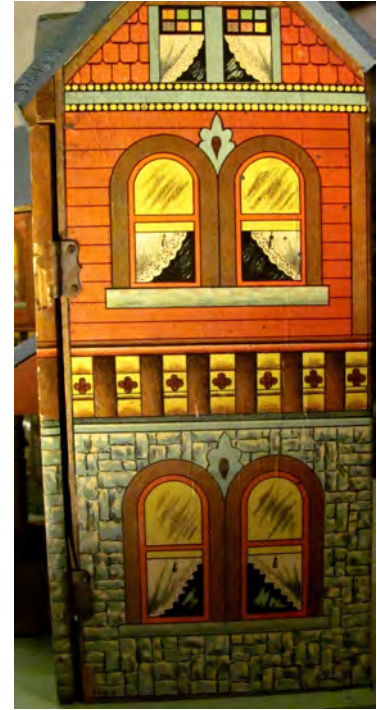
Bliss Stable. R. Bliss Manufacturing Co. ca early 1900s. History Gallery. Photograph by Amy Haskell.



ABC Furniture. R. Bliss Manufacturing Co. ca 1910. History Gallery. Detail of the couch from Bliss Catalog No. 266. Photograph by Emily Wolverton.



Large Bliss House (interior). R. Bliss Manufacturing Co. ca early 1900s. Bliss Catalog No. 574. History Gallery. Our *Large Bliss House* contains a set of Bliss ABC Furniture, of a smaller scale and with a different design than our larger-scale ABC Furniture set. They were added later and are not original to the house. Photographs by Emily Wolverton.



Bliss House (exterior detail). R. Bliss Manufacturing Co. ca 1901. Bliss Catalog No. 571-B. History Gallery. Photograph by Emily Wolverton.



Bliss House (interior). R. Bliss Manufacturing Co. ca 1910. Bliss Catalog No. 573-F. History Gallery. Detail of original isinglass window pane. Isinglass is a natural transparent material made from the air bladders of sturgeons, which would not break like glass. Also pictured are the original lace curtains. Photograph by Emily Wolverton.

◆ Our museum currently has only one set of ABC Furniture on display.

1 Bitler, Strickland Dougless. "Pure Bliss." *Miniature Collector*. Vol. 19, No. 3. Issue Number 96. July/August 1996. P 24 – 29.

2 Ibid. p 24

3 Zillner, Dian and Patty Cooper. *Antique and Collectible Dollhouses and Their Furnishings*. 1998. P 6.

4. Ibid. p 13

5 Bitler, Strickland Dougless. "Pure Bliss." *Miniature Collector*. Vol. 19, No. 3. Issue Number 96. July/August 1996. P 25 -26.

6 Ibid. p 25