



Sue Ann Thwaite: “LadyBug” and Her Fairy Folk

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When visitors come to our museum, they may find themselves astonished by the skill and craftsmanship of the artisans, or swept up in the romance of the love-worn antiques, or simply intrigued by the ancient history of humanity’s fascination with miniatures. But there is something else at play within our walls – an inescapable feeling of nostalgia, a persistent tingle of fond childhood memories that trigger unexpected pleasure. This is a place that can make a person feel like a kid again, that proverbial state of mind of the blissfully young at heart. The world of miniatures by its very design allows us to look at the world through the fresh eyes of wonder. Our Museum Founder, Pat Arnell, is known to tell curious museum-goers that she’s “just a kid who never grew up,” always spoken with a little grin. The Museum is filled with her playful touches, the most beloved of all being our mascot, the fairy Caitlin, who hides throughout the galleries in her many disguises. Pat loves fairies and the rich traditions of fairy lore, making it no surprise that she was drawn to the work of Sue Ann “LadyBug” Thwaite.

Sue Ann Thwaite, known professionally as LadyBug, is regarded as a kind and fanciful spirit in the miniature world. Her miniature scenes and creatures are born from the realms of imagination, deeply rooted in a love for nature and the joyous mischief of fairy folk. In her article, “The Lady Bug Spell,”



Our Museum’s resident fairy mascot, Caitlin, seen here in her disguise as a window washer. Caitlin in her many disguises were a special custom order by Museum Founder Pat Arnell, made by artist Todd Krueger. Pat has many wonderful stories about Caitlin, and children (and the young at heart) who visit our museum love to search for her hiding places in our galleries.
Photograph by Amy Haskell.

Marta Bender writes of how Thwaite works primarily with found objects from her environment, assembling buildings just as she did as a young girl during her



Detail of *Raggedy Shop* (Pat Arnell, 1997). Located in our Enchanted Realm Gallery. Sue Ann “LadyBug” Thwaite made the fairy resting on the cat’s tail.
Photograph by Amy Haskell.

summers in the Appalachian mountains.¹ Thwaite tells Bender of how her “Pap didn’t believe in store-bought toys...he believed that you lived off the land. On a rainy Saturday afternoon, he’d give us a box of toothpicks that we’d use to make log cabins. We would walk along a path and pick up sticks and leaves. When our hands got too full, we’d stop and build little fairy houses.”² This sort of creative process comes very easily to children, which is why Thwaite has such a wonderful rapport with the children who stop by her booth or attend one of her workshops.

Thwaite is a known storyteller, which is in turn inseparable from her creative process: those who meet her will soon be swept into her tales, which often have a foundation in tender life lessons taught to her as a child. One of those life lessons can be found in our *Forget-Us-Not Fairy Castle* (Ron and April Gill, 1998). Dozens of Thwaite’s fairies are tucked throughout the rooms and scenery but one in particular stands out among the rest: a

fairy without wings, riding on the back of a butterfly. Thwaite tells the story behind this beautiful pair in “Little Bits,” an article she co-wrote for *Miniature Collector*:

“The first story I remember happened one day when Pap took me to ‘town’ (three stores). I was about 5 and saw a person in a wheelchair. Of course I stared. Instead of reprimanding me, my big grandpa knelt down and said, ‘When fairies are born without wings, they live on butterflies, because God never gives us more than we can handle.’ So now when I see a handicapped person, or someone different from me, I wonder what special blessing God has for their life. I make a fairy on a butterfly to share the story.”³

Ron and April Gill placed the wingless fairy and her companion along the outer walls of the castle, gliding together in the magic kingdom.



Detail from *Forget-Us-Not Fairy Castle* (Ron and April Gill, 1998). Enchanted Realm Gallery. The fairy without wings riding a butterfly, by Sue Ann “LadyBug” Thwaite. Photograph by Emily Wolverton.

Not far from the castle is *How to See Fairies*, a patio scene made by Pat Arnell in 2002. Thwaite made the fairies found hidden throughout the piece, including young boys and girls, grown men and ladies, and even a magical fairy pony with red wings. There are also two charming little human girls in the scene, made by Susan Scogin: one is curled up asleep on the patio, sucking her thumb; the other is daydreaming, gazing far off to a sight beyond our view. Marilyn Simmons made the wooden chair and stand which have been decorated with greenery and fairies. The chair is grown over with moss and a small tree is winding upwards from the seat – a closer look reveals the tiniest tree house resting in its branches. The accompanying stand is also a whimsical masterpiece, with each shelf revealing a doorway to a miniature world. One can easily see Pat’s elfin nature twinkling through in a piece such as this: the young girls represent the child in all of us, surrounded by the vibrant world of our imaginations, our dreams made real through the belief in goodness and joy. Caught in the twilight between slumber and awake, it beautifully captures the innocence of youth.

On your next visit to the Museum, see if you can spot some of LadyBug’s other creations, like the blue-eyed fairy in a blue dress resting on the tail of the orange tabby in the *Raggedy Shop* (Pat Arnell, 1997). Of course, you’ll want to search for Caitlin, too; she’s always finding new places to hide. Searching for fairies is sure to bring out the kid in you... Perhaps that is the real magic of our Mini Time Machine: to transport you to that most precious time of all – your childhood.

Emily Wolverton
The Mini Time Machine Museum



Details from *How to See Fairies* (Pat Arnell, 2002). Enchanted Realm Gallery. The chair and stand, pictured on the right, above and below, were made by artist Marilyn Simmons. The fairies and scenery were made by Sue Ann “LadyBug” Thwaite. The figure of the girl (left) was made by Susan Scogin. Photographs by Emily Wolverton.

1 Bender, Marta. “The Lady Bug Spell.” *Dollhouse Miniatures*. January 2001. Volume 31, Number 1. P 24 – 27.

2 Ibid. p 25

3 Thwaite, Sue Ann. “Little Bits.” An excerpt from “Fairy Tales.” *Miniature Collector*. November 2010. Volume 33, No. 7. Number 254. P 12-13.