

# Minis Magnified

issue no. 15 Thursday, May 12, 2011

## THE BOAT BUILDER'S STUDY AT LAKE TAHOE Location: Exploring the World Gallery

With warmer months ahead and school nearly out, several of us find ourselves drifting into thoughts of summer vacation. For many of us, summertime brings to mind a collage of coastal images- sandy beaches and seaside picnics, swimsuits and sunburns, and always the delightful view of a sailboat on the distant waves. Perhaps it is this eager anticipation for summer adventure that brings *The Boat Builder's Study at Lake Tahoe* (acquired 2010) to mind. This enchanting roombox, created by local miniature artist Madelyn Cook, spotlights the world of a model ship builder, a craftsman who appreciates the swelling sails of a ship and the thrill of a vessel on open water- so much so, that he sets about to capture and recreate his nautical visions with his own hands.

Model ship building is a passionate hobby not unlike creating reproduction scale miniature houses and room boxes. Both require extensive research into the time period in which the original was created, including the cultural influences, economic standing and technological advancement of the original builders themselves. Both hobbies also require firsthand knowledge of drafting tools and the ability to conceptualize a finished project using extensive data. Not surprisingly, the field of model ship builders and miniature artisans often overlap, as most of them use many of the same tools, working on the most intricate of details to provide that sought after sense of realism and accuracy. Both types of artist are masters of patience, knowing that no other characteristic will so greatly affect the quality of their piece.

In Cook's *The Boat Builder's Study at Lake Tahoe*, we find a round room with walls lined with books. The

craftsman's desk faces large windows overlooking Lake Tahoe, a panoramic view alive with summer light and trees. Throughout the room, one can count seven model ships, a few of which are still being given their final touches, as evidenced by the nearby pile of scrap wood and sawdust. The room seems strangely clean, as though there should be paint stains on the sofa or a fine coat of sawdust on the tables- the absence of which no doubt revealing the meticulous nature of the craftsman himself.

Like many grand undertakings, this particular roombox began with modest intentions. "It started with a class on inlaid floors, something I had wanted for years," wrote Cook.<sup>1</sup> This particular class, taught by Bruce Plumb, allowed the students to design and create their own inlaid floor



pattern, which gave the ever zealous Cook complete artistic freedom. She chose a star, the same pattern commonly found in a compass rose, using alternating light and dark wood. While she worked, Cook began to imagine the miniature world which she was creating. "Truly," she wrote, "with this much work you need a reason for this to exist, a story line."<sup>2</sup> She began to develop the details of the room's inhabitant, mulling over the finer points of his imagined personality. "My resident is a gentleman in love with ship modeling. His favorite view is outside the windows, 'Lake Tahoe,' where everyone sails. I think he hires window washers who won't mess with the geraniums."<sup>3</sup>

Cook's reverence for creating a character can be seen in each detail of the room. Bending down, one can look in and see the bronze statues lining the uppermost shelf of the space, giving the impression that this model builder has a love for antiquity to match the heart of a voyager. Her petti-point pillows have the sat-upon appearance of being much enjoyed during quiet moments reading. A tall glass of iced tea is waiting on the coffee table, letting viewers know that this room is more than a workplace- it a gentle respite.

When you stop to visit this piece, be sure to note two details in particular, the first being the lovely woodpecker sculpture found on the coffee table. This beautiful piece was sculpted by Mary McGrath, an IGMA Fellow and member of the Academy of Honor of the National Association of Miniature Enthusiasts. McGrath's work can be found in countless artworks here at The Mini-Time Machine Museum, including *The Wild Horse Hotel*, *A Touch of Class Regent Street*, and *Cheshire Regency*, to name a few. This particular sculpture of two woodpeckers and a field mouse is one of Cook's favorite details. Secondly, take time to appreciate the desk and chair, both one-of-a kind pieces by Edward G. Norton, a specialist in miniature period furniture. Norton's work has been featured in *Nutshell News*, *The New York Times* and *Hobbies Magazine*, and this Secretary Desk is proof of his immense skill.<sup>4</sup>

*The Boat Builder's Study at Lake Tahoe* is more than an exquisite example of miniature artwork. It captures the idea of a true craftsman, as seen through the eyes of a fellow craftswoman. It is a testament to the dedication and passion of all miniature enthusiasts and, like all works of art, it reveals the heart of its creator.



1. The Journals of Madelyn Cook, property of The Mini-Time Machine Museum of Miniatures.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Frank, Lee and Alice Frank. *A Reference Guide to Miniature Makers Marks*. 1996. p. 315