

Minis Magnified

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JAPANESE FAMILY FARMHOUSE

Location: Exploring the World Gallery

The temperature has been skyrocketing here in Tucson, causing a chorus of resigned grumbles from our city's inhabitants. In the museum lobby, audible sighs of relief can be heard from visitors as they pass through our enormous door. And nevermind our state-of-the-art museum; these days our phone rings with calls from potential visitors whose only concern is whether or not we have air-conditioning. Every summer, when our electric bills are less than miniature, it is easy to wonder how previous generations withstood the heat without our modern conveniences. Tucson is believed to be one of the oldest inhabited areas in North America, with Hohokam Indians farming this land thousands of years before the arrival of Spanish missionaries. Evidence of their ancient culture still remains intact, documenting a way of life that was harmonious with this oftentimes unforgiving landscape. Their resilience is a testament to the human spirit and certainly a point of fascination for future generations.

Preserving the cultures of the past is a duty often falling into the hands of museums and universities which house countless priceless artifacts for study and display. The Mini-Time Machine Museum is no exception, showcasing miniatures from as early as 1742, as well as a multitude of roomboxes featuring historical periods through meticulous reconstruction. Although most folks wouldn't think of miniature artists as art historians, many modern-day miniaturists could rightfully claim this distinction, dedicating their passion and skill to preserving elements of the past in painstaking detail. One such artist is Shoichi Uchiyami, a Japanese miniaturist who is committed to recapturing the buildings and countryside of Japan's old-style villages—which, although surviving innumerable generations, have all but disappeared in the last thirty years.

Located in our museum's Exploring the World gallery, you will find the *Japanese Family Farmhouse*, created by Uchiyama



in 1992. The piece is a recreation of a traditional wood and thatch farmhouse, an architectural style known in Japan as *minka*. This particular type of farmhouse could be found in an area 200 miles north of Tokyo, where very large farms were common; typically accommodating multiple generations of one family under one roof—and the roofs of these houses are remarkable. The thatched roof, called *kusabuki* in Japanese, is primarily constructed of tightly packed reeds, or *ashi*. These traditional thatched roofs were capable of keeping rain and snow at bay, as well as regulating the temperature inside the home year-round. The roof also provided a natural air-filtration process. In his article "Saving Traditional Japanese Farmhouses, or In Praise of Thatched Roofs," Harris Salat writes that "in these traditional farmhouses, cooking was originally done in an *irori*, a charcoal-fired hearth. The roof absorbed the gases from these fires like a giant sponge, filtering them to the outside and keeping the air in the house clean." Truly, a shining example of ingenuity even by our modern standards (not to mention our exorbitant utility bills).

Lillian Watchtel, an editor for *Miniature Collector*, wrote in her article "The Nostalgic World of Shoichi Uchiyama," that

long before he became a miniature artist Uchiyama would often frequent the old villages in remote countryside areas, usually riding his bicycle.² “On one of these jaunts several years ago, however, he was shocked to find that a building he had been looking at only a few weeks before was no longer there. Japan is modernizing rapidly, and Uchiyama realized that in the process, many more of these structures would soon be gone – and he feels strongly that they must not be forgotten.”³ What began as a beloved hobby transformed into a passionate devotion to preservation through recreation. Uchiyama does not merely recreate the houses and structures- he includes the surroundings, the people, and myriad details of daily life. And he recreates each element by hand: his shrubs are made of hand-painted sponge, and his “stones” are sculpted individually in clay and painted, one by one. He is forever stocking his basement workroom with a variety of wood fragments and rice straw, for use in future recreations.⁴ Rather than work from a strict scale like most miniaturists, Uchiyama is more concerned with the mood his work creates, using a sense of proportion as his guide. For example, his miniature thatched roofs are much larger in proportion than their full-scale counterparts, which emphasizes their importance in the traditional Japanese way of life.⁵

In 1994, our museum’s founders, Pat and Walter Arnell, went on a tour of Japan designed specifically for miniature enthusiasts. The highlight of the tour would be meeting Shoichi Uchiyama, who presented examples of his work and detailed his process to the enthralled group. Pat recalls that as of 1994, only three of this type of farmhouse could still be found in rural Japan, making Uchiyama’s work all the more poignant and valuable. Pat and Walter purchased *Japanese Family Farmhouse* during this trip, recognizing the extraordinary significance of Uchiyama’s work, which had already acquired great respect throughout the art world.⁶

Miniatures such as Uchiyama’s *Japanese Family Farmhouse* provide something more to future generations than a mere photograph or artifact. Just like the buildings they represent, each one is an arrangement constructed by human hand, displaying true craftsmanship in a tangible three-dimensional format. They capture the feeling of respect, as only a labor of love and patience can do. Moreover, they are beautiful works of art by their own right, one-of-a-kind tributes that can stand alone as marvels of human achievement.

If you ever find yourself in Japan, be sure to visit The Osaka Open-Air Museum of Old Japanese Farm Houses, located in Hattori-Ryokuchi Park. The park showcases twelve original farmhouses brought from different parts of the country and carefully reconstructed and restored.

1. “Saving Traditional Japanese Farmhouses, or In Praise of Thatched Roofs,” by Harris Salat. *The Japanese Food Report*. www.japanesefoodreport.com. June 20, 2009.
2. “The Nostalgic World of Shoichi Uchiyama,” by Lillian Watchtel. *Miniature Collector*. No 71, 1990. P.22-25.
3. Ibid. p. 25
4. Ibid. p. 25
5. Ibid. p. 25
6. Curatorial notes of Patricia Arnell, 1994.