

Minis Magnified

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COYOTE TRADING POST

Location: Exploring the World Gallery

Driving along the scenic old highways of Arizona, there is perhaps no more common sight than Southwestern gift shops. They are familiar to us all, often connected to small diners or motels, and usually painted in shades of turquoise and burnt adobe. The smaller, stereotypical shops are usually filled with humorous souvenirs, many of which are not even made in the southwest. These are the sort of fluff that make us native Arizonans cringe: the scorpion paperweights and candy “rattlesnake eggs” – surely the most unappealing of jelly bean names. But you can still find a little nook that is truly spectacular, a collection of rare and beautiful artifacts that harkens back to the old trading posts found commonly near reservations and along the railroad routes. These modern-day trading posts are a real joy to explore, places where authentic Southwestern artwork can be purchased by unsuspecting tourist and avid collector alike. With Southwestern-style boutiques and galleries seeming to pop-up overnight in the major cities, finding a unique collection of one-of-a-kinds makes a day-trip to the smaller towns a delightful excursion.

Being as familiar with Southwestern miscellany as many of us are, it is easy to become overwhelmed by the abundance. Perhaps this is why *Coyote Trading Post* (Arnell, 1997) is so fascinating – like all good miniatures, it forces us to take a second look, to see the world we thought we knew with new eyes. Pat Arnell filled her little trading post to the brim with everything we’ve come to expect from a fine Southwestern boutique, and each item is faultless in detailed miniature. There are painted pots, woven baskets, drums, *kachinas*, gourds and rugs. There are finely beaded moccasins, leather chaps, peace-pipes and paintings. Best of all, the shopkeeper is a perfect caricature of any you’d find in downtown Scottsdale: decked out in Western wear, but with a glamorous flare that would be ill-suited to a traditional cowboy lifestyle – more perception than practical. Arnell



chose the figure for just this reason. “I made up this story that she was really a New Yorker, who moved out here and fell in love with the Southwest; so, she opened up a shop,” Arnell explains. “She really dresses the part,” she adds, chuckling.

Just like a real trading post, the works of many fine tradesmen came together to fill Pat’s tiny shop. The shop itself was just a handsome, unfinished plywood shell made by local Tucsonan, Joe Franek, purchased by Arnell in 1990. Franek and his wife Kay also made several of the items within the shop, including the coffee table, the turquoise frog, the cow skull and the Apostle’s Chest. The New Yorker is not surprisingly one of Marcia Backstrom’s charming figures, purchased by Pat in 1997. Backstrom, whose work can be found throughout the museum, is known for her lifelike personas on a small scale. The Native American sitting near the fireplace is also one of her works, though he was not added to the shop until 2002. Perhaps, like us, he was drawn to the wondrous selection and didn’t want to leave.

Looking above the fireplace, one is immediately enticed by the distinctive array of *kachinas*, captured in miniature by

Hopi artist, Bess Yanez. Among them are the Antelope Kachina, Owl Kachina, Parrot Kachina, Sun Kachina and White Ogre Kachina, each carved from cottonwood root, as is Hopi tradition.¹ In her article, *From Mesas to Miniatures: Kachinas Tell Hopi Stories*, author Barbara J. Aardema writes,

“For centuries, Hopi Indians have believed that spirits called kachinas inhabit the San Francisco Peaks near Flagstaff, Arizona. The spirits, numbering about 300, all have particular functions within tribal life. The Hopi hold that kachinas come down to villages on three Arizona mesas at specific times during the year, usually between the winter solstice and mid-July. When this happens, Hopi men clad in colorful costumes, masks or headdresses, represent the spirits in dance.”²

Yanez captures these costumes on a 1:12 scale, even noting the various nuances found between the three mesas, who each may dress the same *kachina* in slightly different colors or masks. She uses bits of leather, fur and feathers to fashion their costumes, and paints them with tempera paints using brushes with only one or two hairs.³ Yanez learned the art of *kachina* carving from her mother, who was taught by Bess’ grandfather. Traditionally, only Hopi men could make *kachina* dolls, but times have changed. “There’s no problem with females doing dolls now,” remarks Yanez. “Probably further back it wasn’t looked at as being very traditional.”⁴ Yanez goes even further with her creative freedom, by taking what is typically an eight inch to one foot high doll and reducing it to the one inch scale. Thanks to her fine skills, collectors such as Arnell can add the Southwestern beauty of the Hopi to their miniature worlds.

There are so many striking pieces in *Coyote Trading Post* that you become transformed; shrunken down to miniature size, perusing the merchandise like any good shopper. You see a beaded Sioux War Shirt, made by the ever-talented Rainbow Hand, whose work has been featured in the Toy & Miniature Museum of Kansas City as well as the Gene Autry Western Heritage Museum of Los Angeles.⁵ You notice the painted drums of artist Joseph Thomas, whose brother, sister and father are all talented Native American miniature artisans, with lineage to the Salt River Pima and the Laguna Pueblo.⁶ The brown, white and gold Navajo rug is by award-winning Navajo weaver Susie Bia, from the Spider Rock area of Canyon de Chelly in Arizona. With over 92 items on display in this one roombox, it becomes quickly apparent that Arnell couldn’t resist collecting more and more of the



charming artifacts. In fact, as it happens with many collectors, Pat eventually outdid herself: located directly above *Coyote Trading Post* is the *Coyote Trading Post Annex* (Arnell, 1998). You guessed it – the New Yorker needed to expand the shop!

Be sure to stop by the *Coyote Trading Post* on your next visit to The Mini-Time Machine Museum and do a little window shopping. The diversity and craftsmanship will certainly give you a renewed sense of pride for the Southwest and her many native cultures. And who knows? You might be inspired to take an Arizona road-trip, to do a little trading of your own.

1. Aardema, Barbara J. *From Mesas to Miniatures: Kachinas Tell Hopi Stories*. Miniature Collector Magazine: November/December 1995, No. 92. Volume 18, Number 5. Pp. 44 – 47.
2. Ibid. p. 44
3. Ibid. p. 46
4. Ibid.
5. Frank, Lee and Alice Frank. *A Reference Guide to Miniature Makers Marks*. 1996. p. 356
6. DeTurk, Sheila. *Desert Son: Authenticity is Chris Thomas’ Hallmark – In Any Scale*. Nutshell News: October 1989. Volume 19, Number 10. p.54