



COLONIAL MEXICAN DINING ROOM

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The Mini Time Machine Museum of Miniatures

Tucson, Arizona

Thanksgiving is a holiday celebrated across the country, and although many dishes are considered staples at any table, each region offers its own signature touches to the presentation, making the art of coming together a unique blend of heirloom and innovation. Here in the Southwest, we have our own special flavors, which add to the New England recipes our forebears brought with them as settlers heading West. The Native American and Mexican influences have provided new layers of flavor and creative license. Where else can you find such tantalizing and inspired Thanksgiving dishes as Cornbread-Chorizo Dressing, Ancho Chile Pumpkin Pie and Cranberry Mole? These dishes are made possible by the glorious celebration of our many cultural differences, an honorable evolution in the spirit of the first Thanksgiving.

Like the holiday itself, *Colonial Mexican Dining Room* (Westcott, 1991), is a celebration of tradition and collaboration, the labor of many coming together to create one special moment. Several fine miniature artisans lent their expertise to the production of each detail, from the terra cotta tiles to the open-beam ceiling. The master silversmith, Pete Acquisto, created the limited edition reproduction set of a pitcher and goblets by Thomas More -the original design dates to 1785. Fellow silversmith Randy Whitman produced a gorgeous sterling tea set and, perhaps not surprisingly, the cat in the scene is one by Charles Claudon, well known in the miniature world for his charismatic felines. The roombox itself is by the great Peter Westcott, whose training as an architect led him to a rewarding career in miniature room design and restoration.¹ His work can be found in



countless collections, both in private and public galleries.

The dining room of any home should be regarded as a sacred space, an area for welcoming family and friends with laughter and celebration. Whether it is used every day for casual meals or reserved for special occasions, the table is always the heart of the room, a clean slate to be adorned with those nourishing forms of love that bring people together. The table and chairs in this particular piece were crafted by Joe Franek, a Tucson miniature artisan who specializes in “the distinctive, Spanish-flavored Southwest style.”² Franek hand-carved the dining set, as well as the slingseat savanarola, buffet and *trastero*. Our museum founder, Pat Arnell, had acquired these pieces of furniture before purchasing Westcott’s roombox, and was thrilled to have found a setting that complimented these faithful miniature replicas.

On this particular afternoon the dining room

slumbers, resting in the calm before the next flurry of activity. The room is spotless, freshly swept and dusted, logs placed neatly in the *kiva*. The silver has been polished and the serving dishes have been placed once more in the cupboards. One can almost hear the hum of women hard at work in the nearby kitchen, or the contented purring of the cat as he revels in having the room all to himself. A lone bowl of fruit sits welcomingly on the table, an open invitation. Mirroring this invitation is a beautiful still life painting of succulent fruits and gourds, placed high on the far wall. The sweet ripeness of the scene is almost tangible, and the wine combined with the shining overflowing bowls lends itself to a feeling of opulence and abundance, a ready sign of goodwill to guests. This masterful painting was created by the talented Melissa Wolcott, an American IGMA Fellow specializing in miniature reproduction paintings. In her article, "Small Wonders: Melissa Wolcott's Miniature



Masterpieces," Kristin Harmel praises Wolcott's keen eye for detail and unfaltering patience. "Depending on the difficulty of the painting and the intricacy of its design, it can take Melissa up to 20 hours to complete one painting, which can range in size from 1 to 5 inches."³ The presence of this painting in the scene reflects the fine tastes of the imagined proprietors, showing the European influence in this Mexican framework.

The room also shows signs of the religious presence in the home, with artifacts on display as ever-present reminders of the divine at work. Aside from the crucifix placed on the right-hand wall, there is a stunning miniature triptych

depicting the holy Annunciation of the Virgin Mary. This hand-painted piece was created by Russian artisan Natasha Beshenkovsky, well-known for her decorative painting styles spanning the Renaissance to Art Nouveau.⁴ This hinged triptych is titled *Red Icon*, and sits prominently featured on the buffet beneath Wolcott's still life. Religious imagery such as this solidifies the concept of a dining room as a sacred space, reminding everyone present to give thanks for the opportunity to come together once more.

This Thanksgiving, take time to celebrate the many influences that find their way to your own table, whether it be your great-grandmother's secret recipe or a dish presented by a new neighbor. Thanksgiving is a holiday that renews itself each year, a progression of new reasons to be thankful, new additions to the family and ever-broadening perspective on the world in which we live. Challenge yourself to try something new- who knows? It may become your favorite new tradition.

Emily Wolverton
The Mini Time Machine Museum

1. Frank, Lee and Alice Frank. *A Reference Guide to Miniature Makers Marks*. 1996. P. 477
- 2 Putnam, Jane. "A Tale of Two Franeks: This Husband and Wife Team Exchanged Corporate Life for a Smaller World." *Nutshell News*, Vol 19, No. 10. October, 1989. P. 57.
- 3 Harmel, Kristin. "Small Wonders: Melissa Wolcott's Miniature Masterpieces." *Tampa Bay Magazine*. Vol. 12, No. 4. July/August, 1997. P. 28.
4. Frank, Lee and Alice Frank. *A Reference Guide to Miniature Makers Marks*. 1996. p. 38