



THE ENCHANTED REALM TREE

Location: The Enchanted Realm Gallery

Issue No. 24

Monday, April 16, 2012

The Mini Time Machine Museum of Miniatures

Tucson, Arizona

Spring is beautiful in the Tucson desert, bursting onto the scene with a sudden rush of color. In a region recognized for its thick-skinned succulents and fiercely sharp cacti, the seasonal wave of wildflowers offers a softness to our dry heat that locals look forward to with great anticipation - and it is a sight capable of knocking the socks off of any unsuspecting tourist. This year's seasonal change has been a sigh of relief for many gardeners, who watched in anguish as the bitter frosts claimed many of even the hardest native plants. Now, Tucson nurseries are bustling with green thumbs and brown thumbs alike, everyone eager to partake in the grand weather and range of desert blooms. With everyone so in tune to the hum of bees, perhaps it is no wonder that we see our own museum's Enchanted Tree with refreshed eyes. Although our magical Tree is impervious to seasonal change, as a symbol of nature's allure it unquestionably excels. Featured prominently on our Visitor Guide and in many museum ads, it has become an icon to our visitors, eagerly sought out by children and the young-at-heart.



The Enchanted Tree and Storyteller, Jordan Hill. Photo by Amy Haskell.

The Tree's uniqueness is multi-fold, with features that are both functional and delightful. As an ambassador to the Enchanted Realm, it greets our visitors with three principal faces: one with a beaming summer smile; another with a spooky scowl; and one face with a snowy beard and brows, heralding winter's chill. Each face points the visitor in the direction of a different aspect of



The Enchanted Realm Tree (Detail).
Photo by Amy Haskell.

the gallery, whether it is the haunted mansions of Halloween, the frosty delight of winter holidays, or the abundance of whimsy and fairy lore. The careful observer can spot even more faces hidden among the Tree's roots, reminding us that magic is lurking around every corner. In this way, the Tree became the answer to a fundamental design challenge: how to display such a diverse range of pieces in one space? To solve the riddle, the Tree became the unifying element, drawing all of the fantastical rudiments together into a cohesive, central theme. Not only does the Tree give a steady balance to the varied artifacts, but it does so without detracting from any one in particular - and it stands alone as a beautiful addition to the gallery, itself.

However, the Enchanted Tree does more than tie the room together. When looking at the enormous trunk you might not think of it as a means of saving space,

but that is precisely what it is doing. Tucked into the Tree's body are eight room box displays, each one a mouse habitat featuring the musings of our Museum Founder, Pat Arnell. Before the museum opened in 2009, the Arnells displayed these mousey scenes



Mouse Habitat, by Pat Arnell. Photo by Amy Haskell.

privately at their residence in a faux stone wall – which, with the holes now vacant, ironically resembles a large slab of Swiss cheese. The designers wanted to avoid the use of a separate wall, but needed a clever solution to display the bunch in a gallery which would have such a varied collection. Once again, the concept of the Enchanted Tree became the elegant solution. Each Mouse Habitat is set at a height perfect for children, inviting them to explore the nooks and crannies of the Tree's surface. One would certainly surmise that any real-life mouse would want an apartment in our Tree, too.

The creation of the Tree was a collaborative effort, led by an innovative team of consultants and designers at Claro Creative Studios, based out of Glendale, California. Mike Spiewak, head of Creative Development, was Claro's visionary for our museum exhibit spaces. Spiewak was instrumental in the conception of the Tree, working alongside Tim Kirk, a world-renowned designer and art director, whose sketches were the basis of our Tree's evolution. Kirk

brought his 22 years of experience as a Disney Imagineer to the Tree's development - the daily enjoyment of our visitors is a testament to his handiwork. Another bright designer, Scott Chase, took Kirk's drawings and gave them physical dimensions, allowing Jeff Thom, Claro's Production and Installation mastermind, to establish just how the Tree would be tangibly incorporated into Spiewak's designs.



Mike Spiewak,
Claro Creative
Studios.

After everything looked great on paper, the Tree needed to be brought to life. Claro's team enlisted the help of local artist Lauri Slenning, who had already been doing some restoration work for Arnells, to create the final maquette of the Tree. The finalized maquette, which is now on display here at the museum, was shipped out to Scenario Design in Los Angeles, California. Scenario Design had just completed work on a



Tree Maquette by Lauri Slenning (Detail).
Photo by Emily Wolverton.

brand new digitizing program - specially designed to create large-scale artificial rock, among other things - and our very own Enchanted Realm Tree was the very first project digitized with this new specialized technology. The program calculated the specs of the Tree and the internal structure it would need: once fabricated, the Tree was comprised of 90% Portland Cement and steel, with a carved and embossed Polygem texture. The pieces were assembled on site, and Slenning was brought in once more to do the final accent painting on the Tree's surface, giving the bark rich, earthy tones. Incidentally, the Tree was one of the first things installed in the museum, even before some of the interior walls were in place – giving a strange sight to some of our curious



The Enchanted Realm Tree. Concept Sketch by Tim Kirk.

neighbors, taking a peek at our progress.

The inner workings of the Tree are also quite impressive. Behind a well-disguised door, the hollow space resembles the backstage of a theater, painted black to reduce light and enhance fairy Caitlin's special effects. Many gadgets can be found, creating optical illusions to delight our guests. For Caitlin's fairy flight above the Tree's branches, there is a projector, mirror and servo. For her sparkle-trail descent, there is a fiber optic line running the length of the tree. For Caitlin's climactic knothole appearance, there is a concave mirror with an illuminated figurine. All of this modern-day magic is thanks to Bob Wasson, a fiber optic specialist brought on-board by Claro. It is also Wasson who created Caitlin's flight through her fairy door at the museum entrance, an effect that children will stand and watch, repeatedly. Adults, too!



Fairy Caitlin in the
Knothole.
Photo by Amy Haskell.

The lighting on the Tree itself was done under the art direction of Karen Phillips of Habitat Design Studio, Inc., and Stacey Westbrook, a Lighting Designer at Lightswitch, Inc. The two worked together to create a mystical feel in the gallery, directing the light from three separate angles and multiple gobos. These lights, as well as speakers for the gallery, are hidden by special banners called foliage flats – or, as Phillips affectionately called them, *flanners*. These flats create the illusion of branches and leaves overhead, as well as directing the gallery's special sound effects.

There really are too many people to give recognition to, when it comes to the Tree. Annette Crump, head of Project Planning and Management for Claro, kept everyone on task, assuring that plans were updated among teams and timelines were in order. Scott Sinclair provided the artwork for the foliage flats, as well as the artistic rendering for the gallery. Jay Ferrell, our Museum Facility Manager, keeps all the gadgets working in tip-top shape. Even I have had a hand in it, doing paint restoration on the tree's surface when needed.

Although it is one of our favorite pieces in the museum, the tree is not without its own set of challenges. Damage to the surface occurs on a regular basis due to rough handling and visitor's shoes, so we are always seeking new ways to protect our Tree from harm without detracting from its appeal. Caitlin's knothole has also

offered some surprises: inside the knothole we have found many strange things, including copious amounts of glitter confetti (fairy food, no doubt) and handwritten letters to Caitlin (we make sure they all get delivered). Guests have also lost many personal items down the hole due to their zealous exploration, including a camera, car keys, a cell phone and more than one baseball cap!

The Enchanted Realm Tree, like our collection itself, represents the hard work and imagination of many individuals. Making it a reality was a journey of collaboration — we can't think of a more fitting ideal to represent us here, at the museum.

Emily Wolverton
Museum Services Manager
The Mini Time Machine Museum