



THE PAINTINGS OF MELISSA WOLCOTT Location: Exploring the World Gallery

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When it comes to miniatures, it's all in the details. The more details that can be reproduced in a miniature room, the more realistic and impressive the undertaking becomes. It is no small wonder then that taking in all of the displays in our galleries on a first-time visit can sometimes prove to be a daunting task. After all, our collection boasts over 275 miniature houses and room boxes, each one filled with the tiniest, perfect details. To truly appreciate every hand-cut petal on each handmade flower in a beautiful garden landscape is an undertaking of patience and determination; instead, many visitors find themselves returning to the museum on repeat visits, going back again and again to favorite pieces. Doing so allows one to notice those special elements that the beleaguered eye might miss: the humorous touches that an artist might sneak in; the storylines playing out between characters; or the sunlight through the windows. But what truly makes a miniature exceptional is the richness and depth that it captures from the everyday world, those elements of our lives that establish a feeling of fullness and vitality.



"Still Life with Fruit." Miniature painting by Melissa Wolcott. Located in Colonial Mexican Dining Room, Exploring the World Gallery.

One of these enriching elements is the human need and love of Art, a fact of which any good miniature artist is well aware. And yet, perhaps unexpectedly, often one of the most underappreciated facets of a miniature room is the scene's

artwork. A visitor tends to gloss over the individual works, absorbing them all at once as a thematic



"Tara." Miniature painting by Melissa Wolcott. Located in *Gone With the Wind* (Chestnut Hill Studios), Exploring the World Gallery.

whole. It is here that the repeat visitor is rewarded: repeat visits allow the eye to move more slowly, noticing that – *oh, my goodness!* – that little picture on the wall isn't just a reduced-size print, it is an actual miniature painting. There are many pieces in our collection which contain authentic miniature artworks, each one-of-a-kind and worthy of our attention. One artist to look for on your next visit is Melissa Wolcott, whose miniature oil paintings can be found within four pieces in our museum's collection, totaling seven paintings altogether. All can be found in our Exploring the World gallery, located within *Colonial Mexican Dining Room*, *Gone With the Wind*/ *Chestnut Hill Studios*, *African Retreat*, and *Cheshire Regency*.

Melissa Wolcott, also known as Melissa Wolcott-Martino, is a world-renowned miniature artist specializing in miniature reproduction paintings. She has been a member of the International Guild of Miniature Artisans since 1982, receiving her

Fellowship in 1988. She is the recipient of many awards, and her paintings can be found in private collections and museums around the world. With such a successful career, it may be surprising to know that Wolcott's arrival on the miniature art scene came about as happenstance, when a skiing accident curtailed her burgeoning music career. It was during the long months of recovery that followed that fate stepped in with a new opportunity. In her article, *Small Wonders: Melissa Wolcott's Miniature Masterpieces*, Kristin Harmel writes that Wolcott's "first job in the field of miniaturization came in 1981, when an art collector commissioned her to miniaturize some of the original portraits found in an historical Williamsburg mansion. She enjoyed this job so much that she left the field of music altogether to become a miniature artist."¹ Wolcott's degree in Fine Art and Illustration from the School of Visual Arts in New York City gave her an incomparable edge in recreating the original masterpieces, honing her attention for detail and perfecting her new-found trade.



Left: "The Spinstress Lady Emma Hamilton at the Spinning Wheel" 1782-86 by George Romney (1734-1802). Right: Melissa Wolcott's miniature reproduction, located in the Drawing Room of *The Cheshire Regency*, Exploring the World Gallery.

Wolcott paints in both oils and watercolors, and does so primarily on a substance called *ivorine* which, as its name suggests, is a smooth ivory-like material. It is relatively inexpensive, considering that only a few inches can constitute the canvas of an entire painting. Her paints are also a meager expenditure, as one single tube of paint can last for

an entire year. Her brushes, however, are purchased frequently as they need to be of the highest quality and become too worn, too quickly.² The real expenditure of any painting, nonetheless, is *time*: just one small painting can take more than 20 hours to complete. Miniature paintings take just as much time to create as those on a larger scale, and they are much more delicate and susceptible to damage – just one wrong stroke can devastate an entire painting.



The art of miniature painting has a long, illustrious history. Harmel details the progression over the centuries, from their start as a tool for the illiterate, to a status symbol of the wealthy:

"The art of miniature painting began centuries ago in the days when few people could read or write and scribes were used to create the only literature in existence. Various religious sects on different continents used miniature art in their religious documents to add to the meaning of the text and to convey thoughts and ideas to the illiterate. As literacy increased and the art of miniaturization grew more specialized, employers requested that their own likeness be added to certain documents by their scribes. During the reign of Henry VII in England, the art came to the fore when it became increasingly common among the upper and royal classes to carry a miniature portrait of royalty or prestigious family members as a sort-of proof of relation."³

In the 1800s, miniature paintings were ushered out of fashion almost overnight with the invention of

Miniature wildlife paintings by Melissa Wolcott. Located in *African Retreat*, Exploring the World Gallery.

photography. The popularity of dollhouse miniatures in the 1970s gave them a strong comeback, reinvigorating the art form and inspiring a new generation of artists. It was into this lively collector-driven landscape that Wolcott took hold of the reigns, becoming so popular that those wanting a commissioned piece were placed on a waiting list of over one year.



“Scarlett.” Miniature painting by Melissa Wolcott. Located in *Gone With the Wind* (Chestnut Hill Studios), Exploring the World Gallery.

It isn't hard to appreciate the skill of a miniature artist, but it is his or her patience which truly sets them apart from the rest. Wolcott's patience is to be commended, the evidence of which can be seen in each small masterpiece, lovingly created one tiny stroke at a time. The next time you are strolling through our galleries, be sure to stop and admire her hard work; after all, it really is the little things in life which make the whole thing worthwhile.

Emily Wolverton
The Mini Time Machine Museum

1. Harmel, Kristin. “Small Wonders: Melissa Wolcott’s Miniature Masterpieces.” *Tampa Bay Magazine*. July/August 1997. p. 26

2. Ibid, p. 27

3. Ibid, p. 26-27