



# AIRPLANE CAFÉ

Pat & Noel Thomas

Exploring the World Gallery

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It's a simple fact that people love heroes. In every culture, in any society, we just love a tale of victory. The Mini Time Machine Museum's newest temporary exhibit, *Small Scale Skirmishes* (January 22 – April 7, 2013) has been a tremendous success for this very reason, bringing our visitors into a realm of miniature-making that can be as educational as it is recreational; parading the historical artistry of toy soldiers alongside the gritty realism of replica war models. This exhibit stands out from our permanent collection in vivid contrast, underlining humankind's ever-present struggle with heroism and defeat. The fight for triumph over one's foes has been a dominating cultural force ever since the first man threw a rock, generating objects in its wake as iconic as the game of chess and as deadly as the armored tank. In the 1920's, America's fascination with war and heroism ushered in something new: the adoration of fighter pilots. While the horror of WWI was slowly receding, famous pilots were being glorified and commercialized through pulp magazines like *Flying Aces*, and romantic thrillers of the silver screen such as the classic film *Wings* (1927), starring Charles "Buddy" Rogers. Flight itself was brand new, and for the modern American living in the



*Airplane Café*, Pat & Noel Thomas, Acq. 1992.  
*Harley Davidson Lady* by Marcia Backstrom added by Patricia Arnell after acquisition. Photo by Emily Wolverton.

uninhibited texture of the 1920s, pilots represented a sense of liberation and daring.

Here in our museum's permanent collection is a wonderful example of that era's atmosphere of aviation adulation: the *Airplane Café*, created by Pat and Noel Thomas (Acq. 1992). Unlike the scenes depicted in *Small Scale Skirmishes*, which highlight actual battle – both real and imagined – the *Airplane Café* is a shining example of what happens afterwards, the giddy sigh of relief of a society proud of victory but eager for peace. In an age where all eyes were on the skies watching Lucky Lindy and his fellow daredevils, those who found themselves obsessed with flight but lacking a plane could find joy in the entrepreneurial spirit of the airplane-themed roadside cafés and attractions which began to dot the landscape. Our *Airplane Café* is based on one of these actual cafés<sup>1</sup>, discovered as a photograph by Pat and Noel Thomas in the book *California Crazy* (Heimann and Georges, 1985).

In her article for *Nutshell News*, "Airplane Café: Roadside Flying Machines Brought Atmosphere to the Earthbound," Pat Thomas describes how she and Noel brought this nostalgic beauty to life.<sup>2</sup> Well-known for their enticing



Photograph by George R. Watson titled *Airplane Café*, circa 1930. Silver gelatin print from the Watson family archives.



*Airplane Café*, Pat & Noel Thomas, Acq. 1992. (Detail)  
The *Harley Davidson Lady* by Marcia Backstrom was added after acquisition. Photo by Emily Wolverton.

subject matter, the two planned to adapt their café design for their 1989 Guild School<sup>3</sup> workshop, and her article brings to light the team's extraordinary techniques. For starters, the original café had 12 windows and two doors, which Noel redesigned to a more manageable four-windowed single-entry building. Scaling down the size while preserving the proper proportions was no doubt a time-consuming task, especially when trying to retain what Pat refers to as "the highlight of the building: its wonderful signage."<sup>4</sup> The signage is indeed the highlight, a veritable billboard of self-promotion featuring American staples like chili, chowder and coffee. The handsome green and gold coloration came from careful deliberation, as the photograph was black and white. With no clues to go on, Pat "decided to try for the rich colors [she] remembered from the labels on old wooden cigar boxes."<sup>5</sup> Giving the paint and wood its dramatic aged character involved a long process of layering stains and color, along with the careful hand-removal of paint – a trial and error creative process that the two have perfected over their career, including the development of their very own special weathering liquid which they affectionately call Bug Juice.<sup>6</sup> The end result is a café that looks as though it has withstood rain, wind and many hot California summers.



*Airplane Café*, Pat & Noel Thomas, Acq. 1992. Interior detail through front window. Photo by Emily Wolverton.

The Thomas' attention to detail is not limited to the café's exterior. The interior of the café features authentic furnishings right down to the chalkboard advertising the daily specials (prices are appropriate for the 1920s: a bowl of Chow Mein is only 35 cents!). The

floor is as grimy as one would hope for from a typical "greasy spoon." For the Thomas team, being a perfectionist simply means getting the imperfect right, whether it be through the rusty handrails (old bicycle spokes) or the grease-stained hubcaps (old upholstery tacks). Even the lighting is perfect, or should I say, *imperfect*: "For period atmosphere, like the old lighted signs on the movie marquees, we decided that all the bulbs shouldn't work. We kept at least one unscrewed until some actually burnt out."<sup>7</sup> Only a miniaturist would require that their piece doesn't work properly!

The next time you are at the museum, be sure to take a moment to reflect on this wonderful tribute to the American lifestyle of the 1920s and 1930s. It's all too easy to imagine Marcia Backstrom's *Harley Davidson Lady*, stopping at the café some years down the road, recommending the rhubarb pie to a passer-by. But for most of us, we'd need very little encouragement to step right into the *Airplane Café* – each of us hungry for a thick slice of history.

Emily Wolverton

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1. The original *Airplane Café* was built in 1927, located on U.S. 101 in Los Angeles, California.
2. Thomas, Pat. "Airplane Café." *Nutshell News*. July 1992. Volume 22, Number 7. P 48 – 52.
3. International Guild of Miniature Artisans (IGMA)
4. *Ibid.*, p. 49
5. *Ibid.*, p. 49
6. Famous Thomas Bug Juice, [www.thomasopenhouse.com](http://www.thomasopenhouse.com)
7. *Ibid.*, p. 51