



JUST SUITS

ca. 1900
History Gallery

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A dollhouse, like our own homes, acquires a personality. Those which were hand-built have been gifted with the tenderness of the builder, who's loving attention to detail speaks directly to the recipient. A store bought house is no less special, as each added splash of color and delicate trim makes the house unique and irreplaceable. For those lucky few who are fortunate enough to have inherited a dollhouse from a grandmother or a great aunt, the dollhouse becomes a repository of dreams spanning generations, often with a mix of love-worn furnishings to be cherished alongside the new. These dollhouses are by far the most delightful to the eye – no pristine and glossy décor can compare with the palpable affection of childhood's frayed playthings. The antique dollhouses in our museum's collection each manifest a certain glow, their wood worn to a shine from decades – in some cases, centuries – of perpetual loving hands. Although their age and craftsmanship lend them remarkable value, it is the residual warmth of bygone youth that draws our visitors in. Truly, our History Gallery seems at times to quietly whisper – unsung stories from glory days, when bones were new and alive with play.

One piece which whispers louder than most is *Just Suits*, a three-story Victorian created circa 1900 by an unknown craftsman in Malden, Massachusetts. Constructed entirely of cigar boxes, *Just Suits* reflects the ingenuity of the period. The popularity of cigars, packed in wooden boxes, created an abundant supply of diverse craft wood including mahogany, elm, and rosewood; our *Just Suits* is comprised of dozens of walnut cigar boxes. The stamped logos of the Buchanan & Lyall tobacco company can be seen on the interior of the house, but it was the discovery of an unused *Just Suits* brand box lid laying discarded in the attic which gave the piece its name.

Although unique in its construction, the material of the house is not the only point of interest. Many of our antique pieces have rich and wonderful histories and *Just Suits* has one of the most colorful of all. According



Just Suits (ca. 1900). Photo by Amy Haskell.

to family lore, the craftsman died shortly after completing the house, crushed under the wheels of a horse-drawn buggy. The man's family paid tribute to his untimely death by adding memento mori¹ objects to the exterior of the piece, including a devil riding a penny-farthing², a horseless green buggy, and a skeleton leaning ominously against a lamppost. It was this description which caught the attention of Pat Arnell, our Museum Founder, who saw *Just Suits* in Theriault's 1992 auction catalogue. The intriguing backstory and the unique lumber were enough to pique her interest, and the fact that the house came endowed with marvelous period furniture, dolls and accessories, had her driving to California to make her bid. She remembers her good luck at not only winning the auction, but that the house fit in her car - with less than a quarter of an inch to spare!

When first admiring *Just Suits*, the façade appears dark and moody, with the deep, rusty red of the walnut glowing, and the eerie, ghost-like painted curtains appearing like milky frost in the windows. The little red devil and his skeleton companion cause a chill – the circular turrets seem haunted with their needle-pointed caps, and the statuary stand silently in golden niches. Even the colorful stained glass windows seem mysterious and vacant. The



Isolated images of two memento mori objects from *Just Suits* (ca. 1900). Devil riding a penny-farthing (left) and horseless buggy (right). These objects were added to commemorate the untimely death of the house's creator.
Photos by Balfour Walker.

fellow on the steps, dressed smartly in gray tweed, raises his golf club high in the air, seemingly shooing away gawkers rather than inviting a passerby for a round. The remembrance of the creator's death casts a heavy shadow, wretched and uninviting.

It is all too easy to forget that *Just Suits* was not created in sadness. Walking around to the backside, we can see into this would-be haunted house and find instead – *could it be?* – merriment. The house is in fact filled with happy scenes and we shouldn't be surprised. *Just Suits* has more windows than walls – the creator was fond of *light*, not darkness. Without electrification or sunlight to brighten the rooms, fully appreciating the house's interior requires a flashlight³, allowing thorough investigation. We find perfectly charming pieces of furniture throughout the house: silk green sofas and plush velvet chairs, gilt mirrors, and black lacquerware chinoiserie. The rooms are a hodgepodge of Victorian accessories, including tea sets, brass clocks and baskets of yarn. Pat added a handful of items herself, including a few bowls, a silver bucket with a matching scoop, ivory furniture in the turrets, and an antique picture in a metal frame.

We find the kitchen warm and inviting, with a childlike setting at the table of freshly baked rolls and a pitcher of milk. Two utterly delightful dolls, including a boy in red trousers and jolly suspenders, sit ready to enjoy their breakfast, while a kitten sleeps contentedly in the laundry basket near the stove. In the parlor, a well-dressed lady coos over a tiny baby, snuggled in a stunning buggy with a lace canopy. The opulent furnishings of this room include a burgundy chaise lounge and shining chandelier. Upstairs, two women tend to another baby, chatting idly in the company of two family dogs. Next, we find the bedroom, inhabited by a doll with flawlessly preserved long, sausage curls, and wearing a dress with delicate hand-embroidered details. (She stands resolutely between two mirrors, apparently

well-aware of her loveliness.) Lastly, we discover the attic, where a young blond man with a black moustache stands looking disheveled near a liquor cabinet – he appears embarrassed and startled in the sudden beam of light. A bed with startlingly bright purple pillows alleviates the drab browns of the room. With so many women in the house, he is no doubt seeking momentary respite. In fact, with so many persons inhabiting *Just Suits*, we must come to the conclusion that this is a house full of friends come to call, not the spooky mansion that we feared.

The story of *Just Suits* is more than that of a life cut short. If we commemorate the creator's death but not his achievement, we do him a great disservice. Signs of his love can be seen in every aspect of the house, from the hand-cut shingles to the little wooden hearts above the front windows. The next time you are at The Mini Time Machine Museum, pay a visit to *Just Suits* – and be sure to bring your flashlight or borrow one of ours. The inhabitants would love to have a little light shine in.

Emily Wolverton
The Mini Time Machine
Museum of Miniatures

1 Memento Mori, Latin for 'remember that you will die.' Memento mori are symbolic or artistic reminders of the inevitability of death, popular throughout Europe in the medieval ages and revitalized in Victorian society. They encompass common mourning paraphernalia included clocks engraved with skulls and jewelry made with braids of the deceased's hair.

2 The penny-farthing, also called an ordinary or hi-wheel, described any bicycle with a larger front wheel than back wheel. This style went out of fashion once the safety bicycle (the precursor to our modern bicycle) became available in the 1880s.

3 The Mini Time Machine Museum offers free flashlights at the Front Desk specifically for exploring our non-electrified antique pieces. Visitors are also welcome to bring their own flashlights from home.



Just Suits (ca. 1900). Interior detail of the kitchen. Photo by Emily Wolverton.