



# ARTISAN SPOTLIGHT: WILLIAM R. ROBERTSON

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The art of miniatures triggers profound fascination and curiosity, felt by children and adults in cultures around the world. Throughout all of human history we have been manipulating scale, cutting our world down to size for artistic, spiritual and playful purposes. At The Mini Time Machine Museum our visitors keenly feel this intrinsic allure. Here, we are colossal – our panoramic, omnipotent viewpoint of history and lifestyles progressively dissolves into a dazzling microcosm, our gaze going ever deeper from the small house to the smaller rooms, and from there the tiny furnishings and the minuscule décor. At this level, treasures of immense beauty and skill lie waiting for the attentive viewer. This is where we find the work of William R. Robertson, a man whose miniature works are so meticulously fashioned that they defy belief. Each one of his creations is worthy of a museum spotlight, though here they are more frequently tucked into a larger scene. Although unquestionably raising the accompanying work's level of excellence by sheer proximity, this unfortunately deceives the untrained eye which, following human nature, is more apt to notice the flaw than the flawless. Robertson's work can therefore seem camouflaged by perfection, patiently waiting for that gasp of appreciation.

Working in wood and metal, Robertson produces some of the most sought-after fine scale miniatures in the world. He is both historian and craftsman, whose



Artist's Set (William Robertson, 1992). Exploring the World Gallery. Full scale paint brushes included for size comparison. Photo by Balfour Walker.



Architectural Tool Set (William Robertson, 1992). Exploring the World Gallery. Full scale ruler included for size comparison. Photo by Balfour Walker.

uncompromising views of accuracy are legendary among miniature artisans. His pursuit of perfection precariously walks the fine line of genius and madness, implausibly reducing the diverse elements of complex machinery into sizes seemingly too infinitesimal to manipulate by a human hand. As a collector of antique and rare tools, he prefers to use historically appropriate methods to make his scaled reproductions; when the correct tool cannot be found, he will customize what he has available or – more typically – simply build his own. Not surprisingly, miniature tools are one of Robertson's specialties, especially drafting and architectural tools, which are all remarkably functional. In her article, "A is For Accuracy," Kim Remesch writes of Robertson saying, "For this artisan, historical accuracy is as important as technical accuracy," noting that his renowned dual masterpiece, Twin Towers\*, features 1" scale locks with functioning keys and doorknobs that actually turn; furnishings comprised of wood from period-appropriate 200 year old trees; and miniature brickwork incorporating the finely ground dust of an actual 18th century brick.<sup>1</sup> There is no detail too small to escape

Robertson's careful scrutiny. His work has been featured by many institutions, including the Smithsonian, the National Geographic Society, the Kentucky Gateway Museum Center, and the National Museum of Toys & Miniatures, which contains the largest collection of his work. Since any single piece can take several hundred hours to complete, Robertson produces only a small number of any particular design – further assurance to any collector that his purchase will increase in value.



Brass bird cage by William Robertson. Museum Founder Pat Arnell purchased three of these bird cages, two of which are located in *A Touch of Class Regent Street* (Bob Bernhard, 1996), including the one pictured above. The other example can be found in *Bishop's House* (Reg Miller, 1984). All pieces are located in our Exploring the World Gallery. Photo by Emily Wolverton.

Robertson's career as a miniature artisan has spanned 40 years, and he has held himself to the strictest standards of quality from the very beginning. In her article, "The Clockmaker's Workshop," author Ann Ruble relates how, at the age of 21, Robertson sought out and introduced himself to Foster Tracy <sup>♦</sup>, after reading a newspaper article on the great master's work.<sup>2</sup> Upon seeing Robertson's miniature ladies' writing desk – his very first attempt at miniature making – Foster promptly decided to represent him.<sup>3</sup> It is not surprising that a young man with such readily apparent artistic integrity would thrive when paired with a mentor whose standards of excellence matched his own.

Robertson's work can be seen at The Mini Time Machine Museum displayed individually as well as being featured in many pieces of our collection, including *A Tribute to Erté* (Brooke Tucker, 2004), *A Touch of Class Regent Street* (Bob Bernhard, 1996), and *Greene & Greene* (Pat & Noel Thomas, 1989). You will be hard-pressed to find artwork which so deftly combines history, function, and beauty – all the while fitting on your fingertip.

Emily Wolverton

\*Twin Towers is an identical pair of Georgian-style mansions in the 1:12 scale handcrafted by Robertson. Each house is over six feet across and contains more than 75,000 pieces. One house is on permanent display at the National Museum of Toys & Miniatures in Kansas City, Missouri, and the other remains in the Robertsons' private collection.

1. Remesch, Kim. "A is For Accuracy." *Nutshell News*. May 1989. Vol 19, No 5. P 40-41.

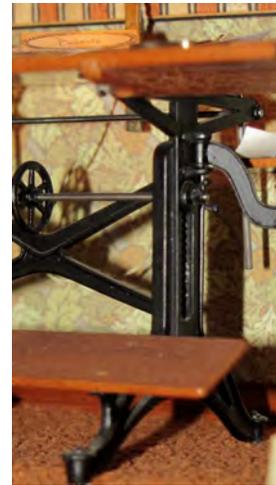
♦ W. Foster Tracy was a well-known American miniaturist who specialized in making miniature string instruments. We have in our collection his *18th Century Violin Maker's Shop* (No. 2/6, 1979). Tracy was also the founder and first president of the International Guild of Miniature Artisans.

2. Ruble, Ann. "The Clockmaker's Workshop." *Nutshell News*. March 1980. Vol 11, No 3. P 40.

3. Ibid.



Drafting table, paints, tools and accessories by William Robertson, located in *A Tribute to Erté* (Brooke Tucker, 2004.) The waste basket was also made by Robertson, requiring 1,020 solder joints to complete. Exploring the World Gallery. Photo by Balfour Walker.



Stool (left) and drafting table (right) details. Both are exact miniature replicas of ones manufactured by Keuffel & Esser Co., an American drafting instrument company founded in 1867. The stool can be raised and lowered and can roll on the steel casters. The table can raise up and down and tilt, using the same gear and rack mechanisms as its full scale counterpart. Located in *A Tribute to Erté* (Brooke Tucker, 2004.) Exploring the World Gallery. Photos by Emily Wolverton.



Detail of Robertson's replica antique pencil sharpener (left) and a full scale version (right). Commonly referred to as "the donut," this style of sharpener was patented by the Goodell Co. in 1890 as the Perfect Pencil Pointer. Inserting the pencil vertically into the hole of the "donut" and sliding it back and forth along the bar rotated the pencil along the file at the base. Note the perfectly scaled pencil and eraser, also by Robertson. Located in *A Tribute to Erté* (Brooke Tucker, 2004.) Exploring the World Gallery. Photo of full scale Perfect Pencil Pointer courtesy of the Early Office Museum ([www.earlyofficemuseum.com](http://www.earlyofficemuseum.com))