



# THE 1/144 SCALE BUILDINGS OF PAT RUSSO

Issue No. 59

Thursday, May 14, 2015 The Mini Time Machine Museum of Miniatures Tucson, Arizona

With regard to dollhouses, the use of a standardized scale is a relatively modern idea. Although the concept of dollhouses have been around for a few centuries, it was not until the 20th century that standardized scales began to slowly take root, due largely to the toy industry. The popularity of 1/12<sup>+</sup> scale – now considered the standard scale for dolls' houses – began to take hold initially thanks to the international fame of Queen Mary's Dolls' House,<sup>\*</sup> a monumental feat of the 1920s, which included perfectly scaled and functional miniaturized replica furnishings from Windsor Castle. However, we can give thanks to adult hobbyists and the resurgence of dollhouse popularity in the 1970s for the ability to find uniformly scaled dollhouse miniatures today, making it easier than at any other time in history to find furnishings that can suit any aficionado's tastes. From this tidal wave of revived enthusiasm other scales came to find their own devoted following including 1/144 scale, where one inch equals 144 inches in miniature.

Mathematically, this scale is the square root of 1/12 scale and is the ideal scale for a dollhouse *within* a dollhouse. Masters of this scale are immensely popular, allowing collectors such as our own Museum Founder, Pat Arnell, to display a passion for fine scale miniatures on multiple levels – truly creating worlds within worlds.



Russo, Pat. *Memories*, 1996. 1/144 scale wooden house. A dime is included for size comparison. Exploring the World Gallery. Photo by Emily Wolverton.

fashion. In the article, "1/144 Scale Makes A Little House (On or Off the Prairie)," *Nutshell News* contributor Anne Day Smith writes about Russo's journey into one of the world's smallest scales. It all began with a visit to a museum, where "...a display reminded her of a time in her childhood when she saw the same dollhouse and she became inspired to build one for her own daughters."<sup>1</sup> As any enthusiast can tell you, the cost of furnishing a dollhouse will add up quickly; it was not long before Russo began to seek a means to supplement her hobby, which admittedly was becoming as much for her as for her children.<sup>2</sup> She started by using her crochet skills to make miniature pieces using tatting thread, but she soon realized that the time it took to make them was not worth the effort or, as she put it, "wasn't a very wise way to make money."<sup>3</sup> Her following adventures with the modeling material Sculpey were a true triumph, first with miniature Hummel style figurines and next with her own adorable, miniscule version of Cabbage Patch dolls which she called Brussel Sprouts.<sup>4</sup> In a winning combination of



Russo, Pat. *Brownstone with Café*, 1996 (detail). Limited edition, No. 57. 1/144 scale wooden building. The name "Russo's" can be seen inscribed on the awning. Exploring the World Gallery. Photo by Emily Wolverton.

The late Pat Russo was well-loved for her houses in the 1/144 scale. However, like many artisans of the miniature sphere, she came to find her niche in a roundabout



Russo, Pat. *Forgotten Days*, 1998. Limited edition, No. 11. 1/144 scale wooden house. Exploring the World Gallery. Photo by Emily Wolverton.

satisfied customer word of mouth, a series of successful trade shows, and sales through her vendor friends' shops, Russo soon found the financial freedom to experiment. A well-received run of custom furniture expanded her business even further; even so,

all of her work was in 1/12 scale and the thought of making 1/144 scale houses had not yet crossed her mind.

Smith writes about the career-changing moment:

*Pat bought a Northeastern 1/144 scale miniature dollhouse kit when it first came out. Her plan was to add a little house in the dollhouse she was making for her daughter. While painting it, Pat decided it might be a saleable item and it became the first in a series of houses she now makes and sells (mostly to shops).<sup>5</sup>*

Due to popularity, it was not long before Russo was designing custom models which were laser cut to her specifications, revealing her deep love for the architecture in the surrounding Boston area of her home. Russo told Smith, "I love Commonwealth Avenue, Back Bay and the North End. I drive around and just sit and look at buildings."<sup>6</sup> Russo created a variety of buildings, including barns, Queen Anne style homes, bungalows, log cabins, and Brownstones, to name a few.

Russo meticulously painted each hand-assembled model, adding special touches such as delicate lace curtains in the windows. But her eye for beauty did not stop at the building: landscaping soon became her favorite part of the process.<sup>7</sup> The platforms on which the buildings stood continued to grow ever larger over the course of her career, allowing for lush and developed foliage that told a story all its own. In our Exploring the World Gallery, we display a collection of nine of Russo's 1/144 scale houses side by side, allowing visitors to see how Russo's use of color and landscaping could drastically alter the narrative of a building. For example, the same model was used for both *Italianate* (1996, #37) and *Forgotten Days* (1998, #11); while the former is bright and cheerful with periwinkle siding and decorative false jetties colored in a deep plum, the latter is the dilapidated remains of a former beauty, stained with the browns of rot and rust. The landscaping adds to the tales of either love or neglect: the sunny yard



Russo, Pat. *Italianate*, 1996. Limited edition, No. 37. 1/144 scale wooden house. Exploring the World Gallery. Photo by Emily Wolverton.

of *Italianate* is manicured with vivid colors, while *Forgotten Days* is overrun with withered vines.

Russo's tiny houses stand alone as delicate marvels for display, but

they add something genuinely special when placed within a 1/12 scale house. In *Cheshire Regency* (George & Sally Hoffman, 1981)\*, a piece designed to resemble our Founders' home while living in London in the late 60s, one will find six of Russo's 1/144 buildings displayed in the attic. Each of them sits on a small table, staggered throughout the room and surrounded by the tell-tale signs of a miniature enthusiast: a drafting table with architectural sketches, a sewing machine, a mix of art supplies, and a cork board covered in pins of inspired ideas. The room accurately depicts the dedicated hours Pat Arnell spent on her beloved hobby, adding to the many lovely details that make *Cheshire Regency* a nostalgic walk down memory lane.

Sadly, Pat Russo passed away in 2000 at the young age of 60. Her career creating dollhouse miniatures spanned 22 years, a time spent making countless collectors happy and earning the admiration of fellow artisans in the field. Although she would never be able to see her work displayed here at The Mini Time Machine Museum, her delicate pieces will be inspiring generations to come – a special tribute to a mother whose hard work and determination turned a dream into reality.

Emily Wolverton  
Museum Services Manager  
The Mini Time Machine Museum of Miniatures

◆ 1/12 or 1:12 refers to one inch in miniature equaling 12 inches in the full scale

♣ Queen Mary's Dolls' House was completed in 1924, designed by the architect Sir Edwin Lutyens for Queen Mary, wife of George V. The house and everything within it is in precise 1/12 scale. The house is on display at Windsor, learn more by visiting the [Royal Collection Trust](#).

I Smith, Anne Day. "1/144 Scale Makes A Little House (On or Off the Prairie)." *Nutshell News*. May 1997. Volume 27, No 5. P 40.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid. p 41

5 Ibid. p 42

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

♥ All houses were built between 1994 – 1998

\* Cheshire Regency is located in our Exploring the World Gallery



Russo, Pat. *Untitled*, 1995. 1/144 scale wooden house on 1/12 scale wooden table. Exploring the World Gallery.  
Photo by Emily Wolverton.