



Minis Magnified

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SPOOKY GALS: COVEN OF WITCHES & GIRLS HAVING LUNCH

Artist: Marcia Backstrom

Location: The Enchanted Realm

Halloween is just around the corner, and perhaps no image better captures the holiday spirit than that of a witch and her magical broom. Black pointy hats can be seen bobbing along this way and that as children make their way through neighborhood streets, and no spooky party would be complete without a bubbling cauldron of witch's brew!

Here at The Mini Time Machine Museum of Miniatures, we welcome the season with a witch's enthusiasm, decorating our lobby and rotunda with the sights and sounds that would make any ghoul smile. However, as our visitors know, the Enchanted Realm Gallery celebrates Halloween year-round. This fantastical section of our museum is filled with delightfully mischievous scenes: skeletons making dinner, vampires playing poker, even fortune-telling mummies. And yes, we have more witches than you can shake a broom at, with possibly the finest examples of these ladies being the *Coven of Witches* and *Girls Having Lunch*, both by Marcia Backstrom (2006).

Marcia Backstrom has been making one-of-a-kind hand-carved dolls for over 17 years. She graduated from Edinboro State College in 1975, receiving her BA in Art Education. What began as a hobby quickly became her life's work, as Backstrom's dolls were swiftly recognized as some of the finest in the miniature world. Candice St. Jacques, editor for *Dollhouse Miniatures Magazine*, points out that "Marcia conveys personality through the gestures, facial expressions, eye orientation, and clothing of her 1"- and 1/2"- scale resin figures. Skill and a reputation for visual wit make work by this Artisan in the International Guild of Miniature Artisans highly coveted by miniaturists."¹ One look at *Coven of Witches* and *Girls Having Lunch*, and you will certainly agree: each witch is charming in its uniqueness, with expressions ranging from twinkling smiles to cruel indifference. The personas range from plump to thin, confused to sleepy; followed by a hodgepodge of drooping noses, bushy brows and toothless grins. The witches all seem to be gazing in different directions, a good sign that magic is underfoot.

Backstrom adds to the realism of her dolls by researching the time period for which they were made and dressing them in clothes she designs herself, oftentimes selecting both antique and contemporary fabrics to complete a look.² If the situation calls for it, she will stress and stain

the clothing, making rips and folds, adding to the personality of the dolls in the same way that scars, bent backs and saggy eyes contribute to her sculpture. In *Coven of Witches* and *Girls Having Lunch*, the witches are dressed all in white, rather than the traditional black garb to which most of us are accustomed. The white fabric and gauze wraps around their bodies, at some points clinging tightly and at others seeming to hang as loosely as drapes. This push and pull of the witches' clothes gives a sense of movement and flux in the roomboxes, as though a gust of wind has just subsided. In *Girls Having Lunch*, the ladies are relatively calm, focused on the recipe at hand, with their pointed hats bent and twisted in peculiar fashion. However, in *Coven of Witches*, the hats are non-existent, replaced with white shrouds reminiscent of the prophetic Weird Sisters of *Macbeth*. There is also a sense of urgency, with each witch raising her hand ominously, either to cast a spell or impede one. Take note of the small headstones in this piece, giving the impression that these ladies are larger than life, rising up and away from the horizon. In both roomboxes, the scene is enhanced with real dried foliage and a distressed photo-background.



Backstrom's dollmaking techniques have evolved over time through experimentation. In *A Reference Guide to Miniature Makers Marks*, Backstrom explains, "I never dreamed I would ever be a doll artist. I've always been interested in a two dimensional art forms such as painting, portrait and portrait work. In college I did take one sculpting class, however it was an abstract course."³ Now, Backstrom is

not only successfully sculpting dolls, but teaching numerous workshops each year, inspiring new doll artists. Using resin or polymer clay, she sculpts her figures by hand, creating their bodies over a wire armature. She then dresses her dolls while the form is still malleable, baking them fully-clothed. By adding color using a combination of acrylics, pastels and wax pastels, her creations come to life.⁴ But just where does she draw her inspiration? It could be anywhere, it seems. "I clip photos from magazines in waiting rooms," says Backstrom.⁵

Backstrom's skills have earned her a place in exhibits all over the world, in places such as the Puppenhausmuseum in Switzerland, The Toy & Miniature Museum of Kansas City, and The U.S. Supreme Court Museum. Our own museum's founder, Pat Arnell, has placed pieces by Backstrom in more than a dozen of our displays, including *Airplane Café*, *1920s Wedding Reception* and *Lady Sarah's Playhouse*. See how many you can find on your next visit!

1. St. Jacques, Candice. "Character Wittiness." *Dollhouse Miniatures*. March 2001, Vol. 31. Number 3. p. 82.
2. Aardema, Barbara J. "Miniature Collector Gallery." *Miniature Collector Magazine*. April 2002, Vol. 24.12, No. 151. p. 58.
3. Frank, Lee S. *A Reference Guide to Miniature Makers Marks*. 1996. p. 18
4. Backstrom, Marcia. *The Forum: Marcia Backstrom Dolls*. Marciabackstromdolls.aceboard.com. Posted 01/02/2007.
5. St. Jacques, Candice. "Character Wittiness." *Dollhouse Miniatures*. March 2001, Vol. 31. Number 3. p. 82.

