

Why Miniatures: An Interview with Patricia Arnell on Collecting Miniatures

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The Mini Time Machine Museum of Miniatures

Tucson, Arizona

The Mini Time Machine Museum Director, Nina Daldrup, interviewed Museum Founder, Patricia Arnell on April 20, 2012, especially for this “Collectors” edition of The Mini Times.

ND: Pat, what does your collection of miniatures mean to you?

PA: It makes me happy. I like to imagine being in the buildings. I think I was born a collector. I remember at about age three asking my mother “what’s a collection?” My father traveled for business and brought me American Indian dolls from the trading posts that were so prevalent in those days at train depots. Each trip meant another doll for “my collection,” as he referred to it. Soon I had collections of all sorts of things, storybook dolls, and small porcelain and glass items. I liked my dollhouse furnishings most of all. They ultimately became the inspiration that led to building the museum.

ND: Do you think your collection has the same impact on others?

PA: I think it is different for everyone. Some people want to make everything themselves, some are the opposite. I am both.

ND: Are there themes, or specific goals that drove your decision-making?



*19th Century Cabinet House. Circa 1885 (detail).
Photo by Amy Haskell.*

PA: I would see something at a miniature store here in Tucson (the store is no longer in business) that inspired me. Soon, I was subscribing to magazines about miniatures which were a great resource. I found out about NAME, the National Association of Miniature Enthusiasts, and the local club – Tucson Miniature Society. They weren’t accepting new members at the time, but then president, Louella LeCompte, got me to go anyway and soon I was very actively involved.

ND: Are you interested in restoration of old or historic pieces?

PA: I stayed away from “ruins” for the most part, because I was much more interested in creating something unusual. I did look for a period house for my old childhood doll furniture and discovered auctions. At first, I didn’t like the old houses of some collections because they were often dusty and showed wear.

However, Vivien Greene, Graham Greene’s wife, had a wonderful dollhouse museum near Oxford, England she called the Rotunda. It housed quite a wide variety of miniatures of very high quality that really opened my eyes to the potential of historic pieces. There was a funny cat, too, that followed you everywhere throughout the building, as though guarding the collection. (To learn more about collector Vivien Greene click here http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vivien_Greene.)



*Man's Library, acq. 1989. (Detail) George Wisler.
Photo by Amy Haskell.*

ND: Did you ever feel driven to find certain pieces or to compete with others to acquire something special for the collection?

PA: I never thought of the collection as having “gaps”, and consequently didn’t need to seek out specific items. I did, however, find myself in the awkward position of having to bid aggressively for a piece at auction. I first saw “Just Suits,” the house made entirely of walnut cigar boxes, in a catalog and knew that it would be a lovely addition to the collection. It was a complete surprise to me that the bidding for that house would be so fierce and that the other bidder would be so bitterly disappointed when I outbid her.

ND: Did your collection connect you with other people?

PA: Oh, yes. The clubs and shows brought out so many people interested in miniatures and we made many friends. And of course there were many dealers, and the artisans themselves, that were so interesting to follow and to meet and talk with.

When I had the collection at the house, small tours came through and I enjoyed meeting those people as well.

ND: Do you think you have renown as a collector of miniatures?

PA: My husband, Walter, and I have become well known in the miniature world. Even though Walter early on said “we won’t have it in the house!” he, too,

got to know everyone and was eventually asked to join the NAME board and stand for office. We enjoyed being involved together.

It was Walter who started me on the Department 56 collectibles. Secretly, I think it made his shopping so much easier!

ND: Were there limitations to your collecting?

PA: I'd have to say, a well made doll. Dolls bring a house to life. And there should always be an animal!

There were certain artisans like Brooke Tucker, Pam Throop and Bluette Meloney that I wanted to be sure were represented.

I did eventually commission several things – the Forget Us Not Castle, the Brownstone room boxes and the Fairy Museum, all by Ron and April Gill.

The Tribute to Erté by Brooke Tucker was a very important commission because she designed the entire room around a drafting table that I had purchased.

ND: Are you still collecting?

PA: Once in a great while. You don't want to buy everything you see. Twenty years of collecting is a long time!



Museum Founders, Patricia & Walter Arnell.
Photo by Amy Haskell.