
Small World

Miniatures are one of the most popular collectibles in the nation. For these Santa Barbarans they represent fantasy, craziness, love—art.

Text and Photographs by D.B. Pleschner

CATHLEMET is the kind of house that pioneers built with big plans and few tools when they settled the Pacific Northwest in the 1800s. A three-story Gothic, its facade is accented with fish-scale shingles and a weathered veranda. Etched glass entry doors reveal an interior graced with inlaid hardwood floors, wainscotted walls, and paneled ceilings. A ladder leads to the children's nursery and an unfinished sewing room with newspapers jammed between the studs.

It is the kind of house that preservationists fight to save from the wrecking ball of progress. Santa Barbara's Suzanne Sears memorialized it another way: in miniature. The four-foot-high model, built to perfect one-inch scale, is the first thing you see when you enter her Montecito home.

The harder you stare at it, the more captivated you become with its detail—hand-cut shingles, polished floors, hand-laid ceilings, each board a fraction of an inch wide. Real newspapers, reduced to scale, are stuffed in the attic rafters. Wheel grooves even crease the brick paving outside the garage. This is no mere

dollhouse, certainly not a child's toy. It's part of a born-again "hobby" that is second only to stamps and coins in growth, according to the *Wall Street Journal*.

Miniatures are indeed big business, reason enough for Cathlemet's creators, Noel and Pat Thomas, to drop out of the Madison Avenue rat race several years ago and move west to build miniature houses full time. Their one-of-a-kind replicas now command over \$25,000 apiece. But money is not the lure, only the means to appease an obsession for smallness likened to a friendly, if incurable disease. The turnabout is just one quirk in a small world full of surprises. That small world thrives in Santa Barbara, peopled by an amazingly diversified lot.

Athletic, energetic, Suzanne Sears seems the antithesis of the dollhouse type. Husband Jack is a Trans-Pacific sailor; Suzanne has also made the race. They've raised five children and own two restaurants, one the Cafe del Sol in Montecito. Yet they bought Cathlemet in 1979, and decorating it has become a family project.

"Collecting miniatures for the house recreates childhood fantasies," Suzanne



Right, top left: Hundreds of small world enthusiasts gather each November at the Earl Warren Showgrounds for an exhibit to benefit CALM, a local group working to prevent child abuse. Top center: Collector Suzanne Sears shows off Cathlemet, her perfect one-inch scale Victorian. Top right: Ruth Mazur paints tiny works of art to help support her obsession. She also presides over Miniatures Unlimited, one of Santa Barbara's three miniature clubs. Right: Betty Martin, shown with one of her 31 displays, hosts the prestigious TAMS show in Anaheim each year. Center right: Master craftsman Ferd Sobel builds perfect scale models of antique masterpieces. Bottom and center far right: Overseen by Margaret Van Meter, more than 65 people helped build and furnish La Casita. The six-year project replicates Casa Dorinda, a fabulous mansion at the heart of a prestigious retirement community.



confides, delighted. "Jack bought me a tiny silver tea service for Christmas—that's how much he's into it. Men especially appreciate the craftsmanship.

"The house is built to such perfect scale that I feel a real sense of responsibility finding just the right furniture. It's a never-ending search. You look at pieces for \$2,000 or \$3,000 and begin thinking, 'That's not bad!'" She punctuates the thought with an amazed laugh, shaking her head. "It's craziness! I love it."

WHEN PEOPLE ASK why my furniture costs so much, I show them this," Ferd Sobol booms in radio-quality baritone. His hand, as big as a bear paw, dwarfs a spindled table leg with flutes stopping precisely at a delicate bead. "That's damn hard to do. Making pieces exactly to scale is what keeps me out here so long." His glance sweeps an immensely cluttered workshop behind his house in Carpinteria.

Ferd, who resembles Grizzly Adams sans beard, jumped into the small world on a friend's dare five years ago, after his doctor advised him to retire before the stress of his powerhouse career as an engineer and custom builder killed him. Since then, scale furniture making has become his second career, and he is now considered one of the premier miniature craftsmen in America.

His one-twelfth scale limited editions reproduce the masterpieces of antique furniture design right down to the tiny dowels he uses. His Hepplewhite dining ensemble, circa 1780, includes sideboard, extendable table, and six chairs. It costs \$1,750. The serpentine-front sideboard illustrates his passion for detail. The piece stands three and one-half inches high. Each cabinet door is made of 12 inch-square layers of wood laminated into a curved shape, exactly duplicating the original. "The entire door winds up just over one-sixteenth inch thick," Ferd says, grinning broadly. "Precision is what makes it special."

Opposite: Collector Barbara Tellefson's towering imagination and dedication are legendary throughout Santa Barbara. As president of the Council of Christmas Cheer, she's turned her home, La Casa Nichita, into a museum of antique toys and miniature displays, among them this one-inch-scale nineteenth century bordello with dolls by Barbara Morelli. Tours through Tellefson's Great Hall benefit the council, which provides food, clothing, and toys for thousands of needy families at Christmastime each year.

Being a perfectionist, Ferd spent months researching the history of furniture making and experimenting with woods before he built his first piece. Traditional woods didn't work; the grain was "horrendous." For miniature furniture, he says, "You must have a denser figure in the wood grain—12 times denser. We tried all the woods in our yard and found that bottlebrush copies mahogany grain beautifully." But only one species of bottlebrush. People from all over the country now send him callistemon and other exotic woods.

Working those woods provides an unusual challenge. "Fluting, doweling, dovetailing—those details sold the original furniture. They're what make antiques valuable," Ferd explains. He recreates those details with a hodgepodge of Rube Goldberg tools he specially designs: pantographs, lathes, and intermediate tools to operate the tiny tools of miniature crafting. Hands alone are simply too big. Inventing the rigs, jigs, clamps, and templates intrigues him as much as his scale reproductions. "Actually, making the furniture is relatively simple once I design the tools," he says, winking. "My wife Millie does the fine detail work and sanding."

Ferd Sobol has created hundreds of pieces: chairs; sideboards; dining, stacking, and piecrust tables; even translucent wooden goblets. He sells them via mail order, commission, and the select miniature shows he attends.

He is now recreating a "Newport block-front" chest on chest, circa 1765, commissioned by a man in New York, for a fee of \$2,500. Examining a photograph, his only reference, he says, "Some pieces just grab you, the architecture and style are so electric. Capturing that artistry in miniature, if you can somehow commune with the craftsman and work his will.... Even though I swear at the guy for doing it the way he did, I do it the same way. It's exciting to learn—how dumb we'd be without the knowledge of those early artisans."

Artisans have fashioned miniatures since at least 2000 B.C., although the first artifacts were Egyptian funerary offerings. Collecting as a hobby, for earthly pleasure, dates back to sixteenth-century Europe, the beginning of an aristocratic rage for dollhouses. That trend peaked in 1924 with the miniature house of Queen Mary of England, surely the most astonishing scale model ever created. It had a library of 200 leather-bound volumes written in longhand by famous English authors; miniature paintings by English masters of the day; two pianos that really played, if one had fingers tiny enough to

fit the keys; a wine cellar with inch-size bottles of vintage spirits; and the topper—hot and cold running water in the queen's bathtub.

Although universally fascinating even then, miniatures were still a rich man's game; real people didn't play with dollhouses. A renaissance of artisans, the communications age, and a group called the National Association of Miniature Enthusiasts (NAME) changed that image in the early 1970s.

Now major manufacturers have entered the picture. Some electrical companies make nothing but miniature wiring and lighting. Other firms specialize in miniature tools, kit houses, kit furniture, every decorating component imaginable—including the kitchen sink. One manufacturer is developing a faucet that actually drips and runs, but a single drop of water is larger than the plumbing pipe.

With their growing popularity, miniatures have transcended the dollhouse concept. You find miniature room boxes of every description, kitchens inside brass teakettles, music shops inside violin cases, tiny clock shops inside grandfather clocks. "The scope is unbelievable," exclaims Naomi Doss, executive secretary of NAME. "You can miniaturize anything found in real life."

YOU WALK INTO A WHOLE NEW WORLD created in small scale when you step into Sylvia Olson's shop, Memories in Miniature, one of the most complete outlets for miniatures in Santa Barbara. Catering to beginner and artisan alike, Sylvia's stock overflowed her house six years ago, prompting the move to her present location on State Street. Now every inch of space is crammed full again with houses, kits, furnishings—even miniature food—and the components to create miniatures from scratch. Sylvia sits amid the clutter dispensing good-natured chatter while her clients peruse the shop.

A different atmosphere infuses another store, Small Wonders Too, on Santa Barbara's antique row, Brinkerhoff Street. (The first Small Wonders opened five years ago in Ventura.) Larriane Hilditch, involved with miniatures all her life, attracts the serious collector in the moderate price range. "Because I'm a miniaturist myself, I know what works and what doesn't." She stocks only precision-cut, all-wood house kits, priced \$90 to \$400. Along with better-made manufactured offerings, Larriane features handcrafted pieces. Examining them, you begin to see that there are as many levels in miniature hobbying as there are miniaturists.



Take Charlie Piper, for instance. Dr. Piper, a general surgeon, is a self-confessed doodler who began building miniature houses about five years ago. Now he gets up around 4 a.m. and makes a beeline for his shop, a converted garage at his Hope Ranch home with fishing tackle dangling from the rafters and diminutive house components piled on the workbench. Alone with his heater, coffee, and classical music, he "putters" for an hour or so before work, building minutely detailed houses. "I started building just for something to do," he says, chuckling. "Now I do it because I like it. Victorians are more fun than anything."

Santa Barbara's most audacious miniature house may well be the baroque replica of Casa Dorinda, a lavish Montecito mansion built in the 1920s, now the hub of a prestigious retirement community. La Casita, the one-inch scale model, was handcrafted almost entirely by residents. Over 65 people contributed, none with previous miniature experience. Advised by Pepa Devan, a well-known local miniaturist, they began construction in 1978.

Today La Casita stands nearly finished in the game room of its namesake. An impressive 84 inches long and 48 inches tall, it bears a remarkable likeness to the original, copying ornate grillwork, decorative tile floors, carved ceilings, even upholstery fabrics. Looking closely, you'll also spy a mouse scampering down red carpeted stairs with a carved cat in hot pursuit. Tiny bats even fly in the belfry. "We thought that was an appropriate touch," laughs Margaret Van Meter, project coordinator and a contributor herself, justly proud of the community's handiwork.

Handiwork is the key to the miniature movement, the reason for its success. Starting with makeshift replicas, like tooth-paste-cap lampshades, artisans have graduated to recreating the world in exact scale using original materials. Fascination for detail inspires people like Mona Crucitti to kick off her shoes after work and weave for hours, hand-loomed miniature coverlets in precisely reduced oldtime patterns. Her work is nationally recognized, also displayed in the Washington, D.C., Doll's House and Toy Museum. One coverlet takes eight hours to make; Mona's hand-braided rag rugs take six. "It's a sanity keeper," she says, smiling whimsically. "But you have to be a little crazy to do it."

ARTISANS PUT THEIR SOULS into their work. And that feeling, the obses-

Continued on page 79

Continued from page 74

sion for accuracy, also infects collectors like Barbara Tellefson, who is a petite, freckle-faced, ponytailed dynamo with a towering imagination. As president of Santa Barbara's Council of Christmas Cheer, she plays great-great-granddaughter of Santa Claus to thousands of needy children and their families. In fact, the council is one of two driving forces behind Barbara's miniature habit.

The other is her home, La Casa Nichita, nestled in the canyon behind Mission Santa Barbara. The house was built in 1907 by artist Ferdinand Lundgren as a memorial to his wife Nichi. To preserve Nichi's memory and promote the council, Barbara conceived a museum filled with "interesting things." Now she hosts tours of her miniatures and antique toys cohabiting the Great Hall, the Tellefson's immense, two-story living room and Lundgren's former gallery.

Lining the walls are exhibits she has decorated, including an inch-scale replica of her father-in-law's general store in North Dakota, an ornate bordello, a witch's castle, and, of course, Santa's workshop. Barbara's dream is to create an entire nineteenth-century village in her living room. "The worst thing about growing up is forgetting how to dream," she declares with a knowing glance around the room. "You can do anything if you dream."

Curiosity, more than dreams, first drew Betty Martin to miniatures 11 years ago. She wanted to decorate an inch-scale toy store. "My husband asked if \$300 would cover it," she quips. "It wound up costing over \$3,000." By then she was hooked. Today her collection includes 31 exhibits, from a one-room box to a 29-room dollhouse that requires a 45-foot van to move.

Betty seeks only the finest miniature handcrafts to decorate her displays. Her replica of Corinthian Studios, a well-known Saratoga, California, antique shop, houses three rooms of exquisite period furniture, paintings, china, and silver. Her creative and financial investment over the years is mind boggling. "More than I want to count up," she admits.

In addition, Betty hosts the Top Artisans Miniature Show (TAMS) in Anaheim each August, inviting over one hundred of the best artisans from Canada, the United States, and England. Santa Barbara is well represented.

Among the attendees is Angela Castro, who once took a class in jewelry making and started casting lost-wax silver miniatures instead. She recreates minute candlesticks, Queen Anne coffee servers,

and, among other items, sterling silver chessmen no bigger than a pinhead. But then, only four feet ten inches tall herself, Angela is a natural in the small world.

Ruth Mazur also exhibits at TAMS, selling her miniature paintings to support "the style of this." Her outstretched arms take in a roomful of tools and miniature replicas, her dream studio and an elaborate three-story Victorian house among them. Her workroom once served as the master bedroom. "It's the biggest available room in our house, and all we did was sleep in it," she rationalizes, eyes twinkling.

Ruth also has remarkable talents—all self-taught. Her oils are gems of realism in the style of seventeenth-century Dutch masters, painted with the tiniest brush that comes to a single hair at the point. Collectors from Europe and across the United States have bought her artwork, all one-of-a-kind, signed, numbered, and set off in intricate frames that she crafts herself. Prices average \$50 to \$135—not bad for originals requiring three weeks each to complete.

Painting, however, is only part of her life. A poised executive secretary by day, Ruth presides over one of Santa Barbara's miniature clubs in the evening, teaching electrical wiring and other crafts. She creates her own miniature world on weekends, a pastime that began about 15 years ago. A model railroad she was making for her son wouldn't work, so she cut up the plywood for her first house. That led, eventually, to the Victorian, a precut shell that she built on a Saturday, wired on Sunday, and spent over three years decorating.

Everything in the Victorian is hand-made, most of it by Ruth: furniture, drapes, knickknacks like the avocado seed sprouting in a glass on the kitchen windowsill and the corkscrew resting near a bottle of wine. "I just get lost in the fantasy," she confides.

That's the beauty of miniatures. They provide the perfect escape, whether recreating the past, dreaming about the future, or just biding spare time in a Lilliputian world where food doesn't rot and roofs don't leak. It's an ideal world—manageable, secure. "It's as big as your imagination," says Ruth Mazer, peering into her Victorian. "My wildest dream is to shrink down and run around inside." ■

D.B. Pleschner is a free-lance writer and photographer with a special interest in sports and environmental issues. After researching this article, she got hooked on miniatures herself.

SANTA BARBARA MAGAZINE

NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 1984 VOLUME TEN/NUMBER SIX ISSUED BIMONTHLY

HOLIDAY GREETINGS FROM
The Last Resort
RESORTWEAR

1485 EAST VALLEY ROAD
MONTECITO
969-6962

Letters	8
In Verse	10
Sally's Kettle <i>BY GRACE LONGENEKER</i>	
The 1984 MDA Photo Contest	12
Pictures of Children and Tri-Counties Scenes <i>BY PETER SKINNER</i>	
Snapshots	18
Earthling Delights <i>BY NANCY BERGMAN</i>	
Don Murray	22
The Actor and His Dreams <i>BY CORK MILLNER</i>	
Big Business on the Reservation	
Chumash Bingo	30
<i>BY FREIA I. HOOPER</i>	
Gallup, Houchin, Pidgeon, Bartoli, and Byars	
Interiors	42
The Private Spirit of Excellence <i>BY GEORGIA SARGEANT</i>	
From Bush League to Big Time with Tracor Aviation	
It Started with the Guppy	56
<i>BY SUSAN GULBRANSEN</i>	
Inside Santa Barbara	66
Yuletide Gift Guide <i>BY TRUDY REECE</i>	
Small World	70
As Big as Your Imagination <i>BY D.B. PLESCHNER</i>	
Books	77
A Sense of Place <i>BY LIN ROLENS</i>	
Art and Entertainment	82
A Leisure Guide to Winter Events <i>BY MARSHA BARR</i>	
Burt's Eye View	96
In Defense of Scrooge <i>BY BURT PRELUTSKY</i>	

Cover photo by Jürgen Hilmer: A private spirit of excellence thrives in the homes of Santa Barbara, thanks to great tastemakers like Richard Byars, the dean of Santa Barbara interiors. He blended touches from the Orient and the tropics with typical California comfort in this elegant Hope Ranch living room.



Models: Lana Marme
and Mr. Spatz