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Wandering the Web — Sociocultural Hobby Sites: Acquisition and Decoration of Dollhouses and Miniature Displays as a Fun Educational Tool

by Lesley L. R. Montgomery (Library Assistant at Western Kentucky University Libraries, Special Collections Library, Bowling Green, Kentucky) <lesley.montgomery@wkbu.edu>

Author’s Note: In 1959, I was gifted my first dollhouse, a shining, aluminum wonder, with its lithographed wall scenes redolent of the USA’s post-war prosperity: a nursery overflowing with out-of-scale toys; two-dimensional kitchen counters with a garish basket of fruit; figurative representations of bright bathroom fixtures and luxurious towels; and an attached garage, with walls portraying every tool the plastic father of the house possibly could need to maintain his tin kingdom.

I still own my second dollhouse, a 1961 Christmas present. The Rich Toys brand, a Colonial mansion, is a masonic house proudly displaying four white, Doric columns that extend to the second-story front overhang. Even as a five-year-old, I realized the two chimneys, with no actual fireplaces inside the domicile, and the painted-on front door were pale shadows of a “real” house. Also, it did not go unnoticed that some of my friends’ older siblings owned dollhouses from over a decade earlier that had actual staircases and functioning front doors. Still, my dollhouse lent me hours of pleasure and allowed my imagination to soar. I affixed black-flecked, turquoise-colored adhesive paper on the bathroom walls, attached pieces of eylet lace above plastic window inserts with Elmer’s glue, and crudely laid self-sticking drawer liners imitating wood grain in the kitchen and living rooms. I now look in horror at these innocent enhancements, knowing as all fans of PBS’s popular Antiques Roadshow know: Do not ever embellish antiques, especially with nonremovable adhesive papers!

All this being said, I would like to state unequivocally that my early experience with collecting and decorating dollhouses was a magical and educational activity, providing immeasurable joy and a strong sense of cultural awareness. Acquiring and creating miniature displays can be a learning tool, teaching the collector much about our current culture, as well as about the history of past decades. Today’s collectors of vintage dollhouses are social historians, carefully choosing the décor that evokes the essence of their favorite period, be it the 1950s with its acquisitive ambience, the 1920s’ through 1930s’ cozy interiors with lead-based Tootsie Toy furniture, or more exotic — and far more expensive — wood and paper Bliss dollhouses from the advent of the commercial dollhouses era.

Modern collectors have a loyalty and zeal for their hobby of choice. They passionately compile Websites on the Internet for others’ amusement and awe. They write blogs with photographs of modern dollhouses they have created from Crate & Barrel wooden tissue box covers or of early 20th-century homes accurately decorated with priceless miniatures and antique bed linens. In this article, I hope to share some of these excellent Websites, blogs, eZines articles, Flickr or Pinterest photo albums, DIY videos, hobby club links, and even a stop-photography site of an early 19th-century dollhouse, The History of Dollhouses and Furnishings. Let me first whet the reader’s appetite with a 2:15-minute video link at http://www.smithsonianmag.com/video/Inside-American-Histories-Dollhouse.html. This thoughtful movie clip — created by the George Washington University, Semester in Washington Journalism Program in November 2010 — features the early 20th-century dollhouse of the famous miniaturist, Faith Bradford. The film footage reviews the miniatures collection of Ms. Bradford, including some items that she played with when she was seven-years-old, and which she expanded upon throughout her life. Ms. Bradford’s five-story dollhouse was acquired by the venerable Smithsonian Institute’s National Museum of American History in 1951. This gift was accepted by Margaret Brown Klapthor, an expert on White House history and the Smithsonian’s First Ladies collection curator. It is aptly described by current curator Larry Bird as, “one of the most visited and commented upon and popular attractions in all of the Smithsonian, and so it’s been continuously displayed, ever since then … and I think it’s worthwhile, even if you’re just a casual visitor or a museum professional, to study it and understand why it works. People bring an emotional attachment to miniatures.” Please note that it takes about a minute to upload this audiovisual encapsulation of how and why dollhouse miniatures are a worthwhile topic of study. I also would recommend the accompanying link, http://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/Welcome-to-the-Dollhouse.html, with an informative article about Faith Bradford, a retired librarian who Ms. Bird notes, “was the first woman to head a division of the Library of Congress, the Card Catalogue Division.” Lastly, your patrons can follow the Smithsonian: @SmithsonianMag on Twitter, as well as Liking the museum on Facebook, and it is publicly recommended on Google, Reddit, Digg, StumbleUpon, and other social bookmarks. Curator Bird’s publication, America’s Dollhouse: The Miniature World of Faith Bradford by William L. Bird, Princeton Architectural Press, 2010, has a link on the Smithsonian Websites.

The online article by Jennifer McKendry, A History of Dollhouses & Furnishings 1890-1990 at the link http://www.mckendry.net/DOLLHouses/1890s.htm, provides an invaluable source of information for dollhouse collectors, creators of period miniatures, as well as those interested in social history. Ms. McKendry’s illustrative and well-cited photographs are an excellent accomplishment to her solid historical research. Her introductory excerpt states this Website gives “Selected examples of factory and home-made dollhouses and furnishings, illustrating trends in fashion each decade from 1890 to 1990.” I have been using this site for quite a few years for my personal research and have never experienced difficulties with accessing the many links. Along with the historical dissertations, which deserve a thorough perusal by the interested reader, this Website provides a lovely Gallery of Images, carefully indexed by topic (Section 1 is a cupboard dollhouse; Section 2 has a variety of antique dollhouses; Section 3 contains farm buildings & animals, etc.). Ms. McKendry also has a link to References on Dollhouses and Furnishings, listed by authors’ surnames in alphabetical order, including Faith Bradford’s The Dolls’ House, 1965, and books by the equally renowned miniaturist, Flora Gill Jacobs, the curator of the Washington (D.C.) Dolls’ House & Toy Museum, sadly now closed down by Ms. Jacobs in May 2012, due to high costs and her advancing years. (She was 85-years-old when she closed the doors to her museum and put the contents up for auction. A link pertaining to the former museum can be found at http://dollmuseum.blogspot.com/2012/04/more-flora-gill-jacobs-history.html.)

Multi-linked sites, such as http://www.dollhouse-info.co.uk/interesting_links.htm, entitled Dollhouse-Info, Interesting Links, with continued on page 59
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784,782 site meter hits at the time this article was written, provide researchers with a wealth of community-driven links. The originator of this particular site states, “If you wish a link included on this page please email us [includes a connecting link for their email] with the details ... If you find an error on this page or that a Website no longer exists or has changed or clearly isn’t suitable please let us know. We will also delete any sites that subject the visitor to irritating ‘pop ups.’ Please note that these are the descriptions given to us by the site owners, and Dollhouse-Info takes no responsibility for anything on those sites.” This British Website indexes both Non-commercial and Commercial dollhouse/miniature Websites. At [http://www.dollshouse-info.co.uk/](http://www.dollshouse-info.co.uk/) launched in July 2000, Dollhouse-Info will privately sell dolls’ houses (the British term for dollhouse) for a £9.50 entry fee, plus four images for a full year. They also have started a site dedicated to dollhouses in the USA at [http://www.dollhouse-info.com/](http://www.dollhouse-info.com/). Unfortunately, this link is essentially non-functioning, and the site owners have posted apologies for their photograph gallery not uploading correctly; it appears they have been trying since 2011. Other connecting links to the [http://www.dollshouse-info.co.uk/interesting_links.htm](http://www.dollshouse-info.co.uk/interesting_links.htm) site are problematic, as well, either taking too long to access or simply not appearing, leaving the user with a blank screen. This is a good example of very well-intentioned website owners perhaps spreading themselves too thin by adding extra pages, causing the researcher to go further and further onto extraneous Websites.

A July 2013 posting by a blogger, Gwendolyn Faye, offers an interesting article on Little Lessons: A Fascinating History of the Doll’s House, written by Erica Washington. The link at [http://smallissimo.com/blog/learn/little-lesson-the-history-of-miniatures/](http://smallissimo.com/blog/learn/little-lesson-the-history-of-miniatures/) reveals archaeologists have discovered 5,000-year-old Egyptian miniature replicas of their deceased pharaohs’ favorite things. These tiny hand-carved representations of servants, pets, furnishings, etc., were made to accompany the king in his afterlife. Later, during the 1500s-1600s, members of the higher social ranks would collect souvenirs from foreign travels, such as small rugs and tapestries, wooden furniture, and miniscule glassware. Children were either banned from playing with the miniatures and cabinet houses or were closely supervised. From 1600-1900, daughters of the elite sometimes were allowed to observe the dolls’ houses at close range, if only to learn womanly housekeeping skills from their upper class mothers. The blog site [http://sewdolls.blogspot.com/2008/10/antique-dutch-doll-house-after.jpg](http://sewdolls.blogspot.com/2008/10/antique-dutch-doll-house-after.jpg) features close-up views of the famous antique Dutch doll house of Petronella Dunos, c. 1676, constructed one year prior to her marriage in 1677. The wonderful laundry room in the attic tells the story of early Dutch homes’ more domestic customs, such as hanging wet clothing to dry on long clothing poles in the hot room at the top of the house. As late as the 19th century, European women would have tea parties and invite their friends, often wives who were no more than children themselves, to play with their cabinet houses after having pastries and tea. Their children were not allowed to play with their mothers’ dollhouses without adult supervision. It was not until the modern era, with its manufactured wooden crate homes and paperboard houses, along with furniture made of paper, cardboard, and French tin penny toys, that dollhouses came to be the playthings of children! The Dowst Manufacturing Company of Chicago, the folks who brought us those wonderful die cast Cracker Jack trinkets, also produced a popular line of inexpensive Tootsie Toy furniture. These fragile playthings are not the purview of today’s children, as evidenced by the collection of complete boxed sets of Tootsie Toy dollhouse furniture, circa 1938, that was appraised on the Antiques Roadshow in 2009 at $2,500-$3,000! [http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/roadshow/archive/200804A19.html](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/roadshow/archive/200804A19.html) By the 1940s, such companies as Strombecker were manufacturing simple but attractive wooden furniture, which is still accessible today on eBay and Etsy at reasonable prices. The 1940s-1950s era of Renwal, Superior, and other brands of plastic furniture reached its apex in 1964, when the Ideal Toy Company introduced Petite Princess furniture, a line of “Fantasy Furniture,” gaudy by today’s standards. No holds were barred by toy manufacturers to raise sales of inexpensive dollhouses and accessories to the Baby Boomers number, reaching 76 million in 1964! 

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Useful blogs, eZine Articles and Online Photograph Albums

Sites useful to the collector or creator of dollhouses include http://my-vintage-dollhouses.blogspot.com/. My Vintage Dollhouses is one of my all-time favorite blogs, started by Florine in the USA in August 2009. She never fails to amuse and educate, with an intensely personal passion for researching and presenting her newest purchases. This “Out of control collector of dollhouses…” with her “OMG, I love dollhouses!” attitude on her profile bio says it all. The densely packed site, with links that are sometimes understandably a bit slow to upload, contains much useful information, along with hysterically funny scenarios. This blogger tells wonderful stories about the various characters’ shenanigans in her fully-furnished homes. Occasionally, this is a truly adult site, with political messages given in the venue of her world of miniatures, such as celluloid dollhouse figurines’ protests over the Texas Governor’s so-called war on women: http://my-vintage-dollhouses.blogspot.com/search?label=Adda-Room (“members of S.A.L. (Seniors Are Liberal) group at Shady Acres Retirement Home are returning from participating in a peaceful assembly protesting what they consider their governor’s war on women.”). Other blogs, articles, and photograph albums that are accessible, useful, and interesting include: http://rebeccascollections.blogspot.com/. Rebecca lived in Papua New Guinea during the 1970s and provides excellent links to European doll’s house Websites. As well, she documents an interesting history of Mrs. Oswald Gibson of Melbourne, Victoria, who raised funds during WWII, making several doll’s houses and two shopping centres to sell at fund-raising raffles. The Flickr link found at http://www.flickr.com/photos/dolldollshouses/7667865820/in/7215763081836336/; displays photographs of Carrie Walter Stettheimer’s dollhouse that she created and decorated during the 1920s and 1930s. This remarkable dollhouse features original miniatures by some of her friends, such as paintings by Marcel Duchamp, Corey Moortgat, Mother. Wife. Artist. Collector blog is perfectly charming and visually stunning in its presentation at the link http://coreymoortgat.blogspot.com/2012/10/doll-house-tour.html, with sweet stories about her dollhouse and its residents. http://www.dollhousespastandpresent.com/apps/photos/album?albumid=12182024, Dolls House Past & Present is “a Website and eZine about doll’s houses: antique, vintage, and modern. Plus furniture and accessories” started by Wendy Gater in 2009. It is a British site with rare antique doll’s houses and furnishings for sale, a photo and video gallery, articles, magazine index, and archives. This is a good, solid, and long-standing Website that keeps its professional appearance intact by setting parameters for its members’ use of the site. Another of my long-time favorite blogs is Tracy’s Toys (and Some Other Stuff) at http://tracystoys.blogspot.com/. Tracy’s Toys blogspot is particularly well-organized, given that she is a library director: http://www.blogger.com/profile/17093220492913265429. “I’m a library director with a background in museums as well.” Lastly, researchers can find a plethora of useful information on Pinterest, where folks make their own houses and accessories. Bloggers provide amusement for the general public with interesting photographs of their creations, including Jenny Lawson’s haunted dollhouse found at the link http://kirsty.com/2011/10/27/dollhouse-carved-by-jenny-lawson/?p=YToxNzUOjE6mksO2k6MeE0Mz9, and how-to tips for very modern dollhouses attached to a blog at The Call of the Small http://call-small.blogspot.com/2011/08/tissue-box-house-of-three.html.

Clubs

Sites include a historical society dedicated to promoting the accurate representation of period dollhouse scenes http://www.cheshirehistory.org/dolls2004.htm (The Cheshire Historical Society in Cheshire, Connecticut, USA). There are many dollhouse clubs and societies around the world, and it’s worth checking the Internet for your local area. You might find a group of like-minded folks with whom to share your favorite hobby.

Videos

Videos pertaining directly to collecting antique dollhouses and miniatures include the YouTube Amersham doll’s house video, uploaded in July 2009: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UlSrWfYeUL4. I am including this link, not because the house was for sale, but because the narrator describes the house …what to look for; features denoting what decades the house was produced (1930s through 1940s); and frankly, the narrator has a lovely voice and excellent presentation of this vintage doll’s house. Dolls House – British Pathé is an incredible link, with short films — some silent, some narrated — on the topic of doll’s houses from all eras. These short movies were filmed between 1928 and 1969. http://www.britishpathe.com/workspaces/BritishPathe/7Tb2gsQ

How-to Sites

Susan’s Mini Homes includes an article written in November 2012, Candy Containers as Antique Doll House Furniture with photographs of homemade furniture from the 1870s to 1920s: http://susanshousbs.blogspot.com/2012/11/candy-containers-as-antique-doll-house.html. About.com Miniatures features, among other topics, how to make custom dollhouse scale doors, windows, stairs, and other building parts in Lesley Shepherd’s 2010 article: http://miniatures.about.com/od/makeminiatureredisplays/p/Make-Custom-Dollhouse-Scale-Doors-Windows-Stairs-And-Other-Building-Parts.htm. A how-to site for tiny kitchen utensils you can make at home with non-toxic materials for little children is attractive and adorable on Made by Joel’s August 2013 blog: http://madebyjoel.com/2013/08/minitairue-kitchen-set.html.

Television Series

Just for fun, I am including a stop-photography film clip of the British dolls’ house adventure Tottie: The Story of a Dolls’ House, based on books by the renowned Rumer Godden: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5aEF1q4r4CU. This YouTube film presents rare footage of the 1980s animation series. A 10-minute YouTube film can be found at the link http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U8fLE2B3ok. Information about how to purchase new stuff positions for every new wrinkle we can think of, and alienating every political party but one. We need to work hard to please everyone. Extra special hard.

In times like these, it’s important to remember that it really doesn’t matter who throws you a lifeline when you’re drowning. It only matters that you end up on dry land, safe and secure. 😊