

Not In Front Of The Children (1298 words)
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Not In Front Of The Children

Michael Percy discovers that dolls houses have left the nursery and become a hobby for consenting adults.

Don't tell the children but dolls houses are not for them. They may have grown up with the idea that re-creating the world in miniature was something for children to enjoy but the truth is that grown-ups have moved in on the miniature world and are keeping the best bits for themselves. Not surprising because many thousands of pounds and endless hours are lavished on the world of miniatures.

Howard Phillips has been building in miniature for 27 years and broke off from sculpting a block of foam into an acorn shaped house for a mouse to talk about his work.

"Traditionally most people collect Victorian and often Georgian houses, fixtures and fittings. Now we are finding that the new generation coming through is interested in recreating second world war domestic settings; perhaps something they remember from their childhood or maybe it's to bring alive their parents' experiences."

So why is Howard sculpting a house for a mouse in his Twyford workshop?

"Our customers, they know exactly what they want," said Howard smiling. "The job I'm doing at the moment could be categorised as fantasy. Our customer has been collecting miniature mice and now she wants houses for them and we've got to make country furniture as well. The mice are really cute and she's been collecting them for quite a while. The mouse houses are based on acorns. Of course a mouse couldn't live in an acorn so this is fantasy. But great fun."

That customer is Evelyn Cooper from Weston Turville who introduced her grand daughters Ella and Holly to the dolls' house world when they were very young.

"I believe it's awakened a creative side to Ella – the ability to design rooms and to be creative. She's a really untidy girl in her bedroom but her dolls' houses are just immaculate – everything is laid out as it would be in a tiny stately home – it's fantastic," said Evelyn. "Ella is hoping to study drama at RADA."

Evelyn explained how the mice arrived on the scene: "At first we bought one or two mice and Ella, who is nearly sixteen now, thought it would

be good to have a room for the mice in the Dolls House. Then we decided they should have a house of their own so I asked Howard to make one,”

“Holly is thirteen and has always been interested in the dolls house animals – cats and dogs – and looked after the stables and horses. Holly wants to study veterinary medicine so the dolls house world appears to reflect life to some extent,” added Evelyn.

The term dolls house covers a wide variety of miniature buildings and periods. Often these tiny structures do not have any humans represented in them and focus entirely on the furnishings and decorations from the chosen historical period.

Miniaturism is a very popular hobby in America where the current trend is to recreate contemporary settings. UK miniaturists often re-create their own homes in miniature and then fit them out in styles that would be too bold to attempt in real life – or just too expensive.

From her home near Reading Elizabeth LePla under the name Elf Miniatures specialises in modern bathroom and kitchen fittings for miniature houses.

“I have many overseas customers including the USA,” explained Elizabeth. “Top price for a modern kitchen is about £750 with fully opening doors. But I do a self assembly kit for under £50.”

Some Elf Miniature items have been used in TV advertisements. “Oasis drinks, Sony and Tesco have used my miniatures in animated films but my most intriguing commission involved providing a kitchen for a miniature reproduction of the set used for the TV chefs The Two Fat Ladies. This customer built the whole studio including cameras and lights and he specially commissioned dolls of the Two Fat Ladies.”

Back at the Berkshire Dolls House Company in Twyford Howard Phillips, who worked for 10 years as a fire fighter in Berkshire before descending into the world of miniatures, talked about the most demanding fantasy commission he has completed.

“My most challenging fantasy client has a library which doesn’t have room for a dolls house but there are gaps between the books so we do little room boxes for her. The first two or three room settings had Victorian themes. Then she wanted a bedroom in a Georgian style with a corner fireplace, and a door opposite. There was to be a double bed with an oak tree coming through the middle and the branches spread out close to the ceiling. But the important factor was the lighting; the branches had to cast shadows on the ceiling. The lighting effect was the biggest challenge. This lady would never say what inspired her to have this scene created in miniature.”

Most people come to miniaturism after buying a self-assembly dolls house kit. They very soon become obsessed with the detail of decorating and furnishing the tiny rooms. There is a very wide range of furniture that is mass produced and sells for a few pounds. But what brings a dolls house to life are the small items – the bric-a-brac - that clutter out real lives: hair brushes, books, brooms, food items, mobile phones, TV sets – anything that exists life size will have been scaled down to fit a dolls house.

The same applies to wallpaper, floorings, roof tiles and bricks. All of these can be bought printed in miniature on paper. But in order to take things to a higher level of realism items like dolls house floorings, roof tiles and

bricks can be bought in scaled down versions produced using the real material.

Sophia Etherington works as an interior designer (in miniature) with Howard Phillips. It fell to Sophia to lay 27,000 miniature bricks and hang several thousand tiny roof tiles when Howard was commissioned to build a model of a stately home. "It gives the model a better texture and the light strikes the surface in a more realistic way," explained Sophia. "Bricklaying at this scale is very therapeutic – I love it. I wouldn't want to work on a real building site though."

Detail is very important to miniaturists and Felicity Holland from Princess Risborough uses a life-time interest in embroidery to create tiny copies of famous antique rugs. "I work in the evenings when I'm watching the TV. Just a few hours at a time so one of my rugs will take up to two months to complete."

Felicity sells her creations to other miniaturists for around £70 which probably means she's working for a small fraction of the minimum wage.

"It's not about the money. I do this because I love it," said Felicity. "This is an addictive hobby – it should carry a government health warning."

Felicity came to miniaturism via the classic route when her husband Ron bought a dolls house kit for his wife.

"It was a Christmas present - something fun and light hearted," Ron explained. "The first house we lived in together was a Victorian Terrace so that's the kit I bought. We assembled it and I got involved sorting out the wiring for the lighting and we started collecting furniture. Before we realised what was happening we were both hooked."

That was in 1996 and Felicity and Ron (known as Ronfel Miniatures to their friends) now attend three dolls house clubs and organise an annual miniaturists fair in Thame every February with a truly amateur love for their hobby. Felicity loves making miniature soft furnishings and Ron builds and repairs dolls houses. His current project is a lace maker's cottage with a bordello on the first floor. It takes all sorts...