

Tiny Things

Midwest Miniatures Museum is big on little details

BY LISA MACKINDER

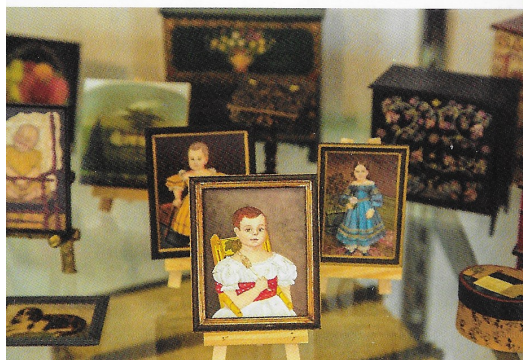
Ina Whitney points to an itty-bitty cat peeking from behind tiny curtains at the very back of the Midwest Miniatures Museum's "Midnight at the Pied-à-Terre" exhibit. Although Whitney has volunteered at the Hickory Corners museum for 10 years, she never noticed that cat until a visitor saw it. But Whitney routinely encounters previously unnoticed details in the museum's displays.

"There's little discoveries like that all the way through," says Whitney, president of the museum's board.

The Midwest Miniatures Museum features miniature houses, room boxes and vignettes, miniature silver and crystal, special themed



Brian Powers



exhibits, and to-scale dolls. Most of its displays are done in 1:12 scale, meaning one inch equals one foot, but the museum does have even tinier ones in HO scale, which is 1:87 scale — or 3.5 mm (0.137795 inches) to one foot (think model railroads).

The museum's seven rooms are filled with miniature pieces created by world-renowned miniaturist artists. Visitors will find such small-scale replicas as six 1900-era medical specialty rooms filled with precise replicas of medical equipment, including stethoscopes, thermometers and bandages, and a grocery

Above: Ina Whitney, board president of the Midwest Miniatures Museum holds a tiny figure from the Hopi Indian exhibit that includes 200 tiny, unique pieces. At left: Tiny portraits and miniature furniture on display. Opposite page, from left: The "Brakenwood Vale" exhibit invites young visitors on a treasure hunt; a miniature display depicting quilters.



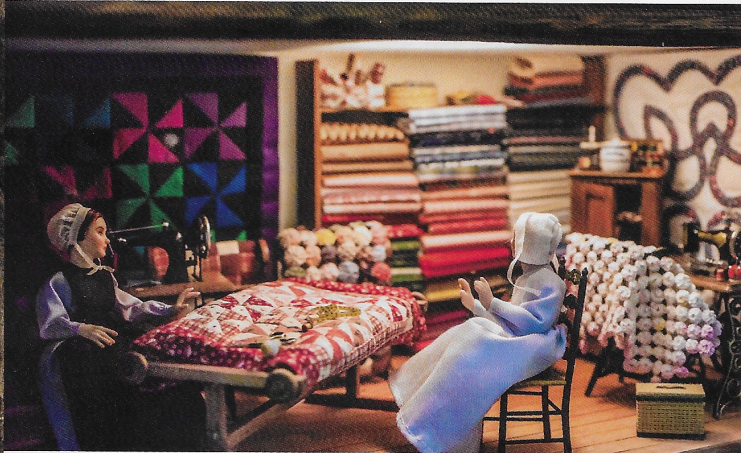
store stocked with tiny bell peppers, onions and tomatoes. There's a replica of the house in Arles, France, depicted in painter Vincent van Gogh's *The Yellow House* where van Gogh and artist Paul Gauguin rented rooms. Inside the miniature house are paintings, easels and bedroom furniture.

'Little treasure hunt'

With so many minute and detailed pieces within the exhibits, it's easy to see why even Whitney notices new elements every day.

One of the exhibits, "Brakenwood Vale," is by far the biggest hit with young visitors, says Whitney. Created by Rik Pierce, a Vancouver, Washington, artist and owner of Frogmorton Studios (named after a village in the *Lord of the Rings* series), "Brakenwood Vale" depicts a thatch-roofed cottage tucked into a craggily branched tree with lifelike bark, invoking imaginings of gnomes and woodland creatures. Children can engage in a "little treasure hunt" of the exhibit, says Whitney, through a game that has them count all of the figures nestled into nooks and crannies of the exhibit and find secret compartments for elves.

"This was actually the last large piece that he (Pierce) did before he was commissioned (by an individual) to do a Hogwarts (the school of witchcraft and wizardry of *Harry Potter* fame)," Whitney says, "and that was so successful that he's spent the rest of his life catching up with *Harry Potter* commissions."



How it started

A decade ago, local collector Francis Mary Light and miniaturist artists Criss Goad and Pat Bauder started the Midwest Miniatures Museum so that people would see miniatures as an art form. The museum, located on the grounds of the Gilmore Car Museum campus but not part of the Gilmore museum (the museum has its own entrance), now partners with the Barry Community Foundation and organizations such as the Arts Council of Greater Kalamazoo to educate the public and provide exposure for miniaturist artists. The museum also offers classes.

"We have a class that's a 1:144 scale," Whitney says. "You end up with a whole house that fits into the palm of your hand."

Other classes include wiring, construction and design for 3D printing.

"One of the fads right now amongst miniaturists — which I guess we could do here, although we haven't tried it — is people are having themselves photographed so they get 360-degree photos, and then it



Midwest Miniatures Museum

Where: 6855 W. Hickory Road,
Hickory Corners

When:
May–October
11 a.m.–5 p.m. weekdays

11 a.m.–6 p.m. weekends

November & April

11 a.m.–5 p.m. Friday and 11 a.m.–6 p.m. Saturday and Sunday

How much: Admission is free, but donations are accepted.



Brian Powers

(the 3D printer) creates a 'mini me,'" Whitney says.

Whitney came to the Midwest Miniatures Museum after she retired as an administrator of mental health facilities for the state of Michigan. She admits she became interested in miniatures after starting a dollhouse project for her niece.

"I somehow got it into my head that she needed a dollhouse," Whitney says, noting

she hadn't the slightest idea of how to begin. "But a year later it was done, and not just me but about a dozen of my friends had gotten involved with it and were hooked on miniatures."

After that, Whitney joined the local miniatures club, Mini-Fingers of Kalamazoo.

"And then Francis (Light) twisted my arm into doing some things and it's just kind of gone from there," she says.





Why miniatures?

What is it about making miniatures that's so intriguing?

"There is an underlying fascination that people have, and have always had, with tiny things," Whitney says.

Miniatures began with Dutch Baby (Doll) Houses in the 15th century, she says, to train girls on how to run a household. In the 16th century, it became a fashion trend to elaborately decorate small houses. Miniature toys have even been found in Egyptian tombs. Model railroads, toy soldiers and model building are more examples of our fascination with small versions of big things.

Currently, one of the most popular new attractions in Europe, Whitney says, is

Clockwise from opposite page: A miniature child's room complete with dollhouse; a dining room; exact replicas of medical instruments; a tiny box of silver tableware; and a Hopi Indian from the exhibit donated by Francis Light, one of the founders of the museum.

the HO-scale Miniature Wunderland in Hamburg, Germany. In a 16,000-square-foot warehouse, a miniature world has been created with 260,000 figures, nine theme worlds and 1,040 trains. Controlled by 40 computers, 250 vehicles and crafts are mobile. Boats sail in the harbor, planes take off from the airports and trains wind through cities and countrysides. During the night simulation, 300,000 LEDs illuminate homes, stadiums and streetlights.

"There are fires that their fire department puts out," Whitney says, "and the whole thing goes through a 24-hour cycle within — an hour. It's absolutely amazing."

Though surrounded by fascinating miniaturist art all day, Whitney notes that it's not her favorite part of the job.

"It's the kids," she says and then grins and adds, "and it could be a kid of any age who discovers miniatures and didn't know about them." ©