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‘TINY PERSPECTIVES’ The History of Miniatures

BY PAULA PASIC, CURATOR

From April 1 to June 25, 2006, the Pasadena Museum of History will host the exhibition “Tiny Perspectives: the History of Miniatures.” This fascinating exhibit will explore the role and appeal of the miniature in daily life throughout history, its ubiquity in art, literature, and industry, and its continued influence on the arts and popular culture today. The exhibition will feature artifacts dating from 3000 B.C. from Egypt, Greece, Rome, the Victorian age and the Industrial Revolution.

The exhibit’s journey through history will explore the beauty of the very small in pottery, bronze, and terracotta. Egyptian archeological digs have unearthed remarkable miniature models intended to serve the needs of the entombed in the afterlife. These include tools, food, animals, furniture, and servants. In the Orient, home shrines utilized miniatures as surrogates for temple statuary, while in the West, the American Indians created miniatures of their baskets and pottery, as well as dolls for their children.

There have been many debates over whether miniatures in earlier times served as toys for small children or as novelties for adults. The cross-generational fascination with dollhouses emerged in 1637 when Baron von Stromer introduced the baby house in Germany, a miniature house intended for serious collectors. Many of these houses included everything it took to maintain a real home, and were made by the same artisans that constructed everyday houses. Architects, silversmiths, furniture makers, potters, and painters contributed their talents towards the art of miniature, lending authenticity to the smaller scale.

Cultural changes brought by the Industrial Revolution and the Victorian era transformed society’s view



PHOTO COURTESY OF PASADENA MUSEUM OF HISTORY

of children and their role in daily life. No longer relegated to being merely “seen and not heard,” children were freed from the social expectation to behave as small adults and were allowed to indulge in play. The confluence of manufacturing with the emerging popularity of toys brought the doll into the common home.

Collecting has always been a pleasure in which adults indulge, and the realm of miniatures has been no exception. Queen Elizabeth was one famous collector, and the sprawling fairy castle of early film actress Colleen Moore is a popular exhibit destination at the Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago, Illinois.

“Tiny Perspectives” will brush shoulders with the famous as well. Harold Lloyd’s daughter’s dollhouse will be on exhibit, as well as rooms by “Heidi” author Johanna Spyri, and a China shop from the Mott family collection. In addition, a copy of the house that Anne Hathaway, William Shakespeare’s alleged wife, lived in will be on display.

The 20th century introduced miniatures to all the arts, becoming an essential component in the real-



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