

## VIEW

## Weekend

Aficionados of the Miniature Art Maintain Their Creations Are Not Just for Kids

## It's a Small World

By ANNE Z. COOKE

A special group of people who daydream about falling down a rabbit hole, finding a bottle at the bottom labeled "Drink Me" and escaping through a tiny door into a miniature garden are gathering today to revel in a mutual fantasy.

Their hobby and sometime obsession: the mini-world of doll-house furniture and furnishings. The occasion: the Third Annual Miniature Fantasy Show and Sale from 9:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. today at the Veterans Memorial Auditorium in Culver City.

Lest anyone think that miniatures are mere children's toys, a peek at the diminutive wares displayed by the show's 50 exhibitors and 55 dealer/craftsmen will set the doubter straight.

**Large Prices for Small Pieces**

The teeny wicker sofas, hand-bound books smaller than a postage stamp and petite carved and painted cats are works of art not intended for the sticky touch of small hands.

Nor are prices diminutive. It's possible to spend \$1,000 on a silver tea set or a piece of handmade hardwood furniture crafted to 1/12th or 1/24th scale, the two industry standards, and as much as \$100,000 on a completely decorated room.

At today's show, however, novices at the pint-size altar of "small" who are trying to furnish a first doll house will feel right at home. Most dealers offer some simple items at pipsqueak prices: They start as low as \$3.

Those who are tempted by the show's Lilliputian



items and think they'd like to follow the same route to addiction that hooked many of the miniature industry's expert craftsmen can try making their own teeny-weeny lamp shades or hassocks.

They can start their first project at one of 11 "Make-It-and-Take-It" tables set up on the auditorium stage. Three dollars to \$7 buys everything you need to get started: materials, assistance from craftsmen attending the show and written instructions for your second effort at home.

**12,000 Members Nationwide**

"Our show is really unique," said Sheila Benjamin, president of Miniatures West, the sponsoring club and an official branch of the National Assn. of Miniature Enthusiasts, which boasts 12,000 members nationwide.

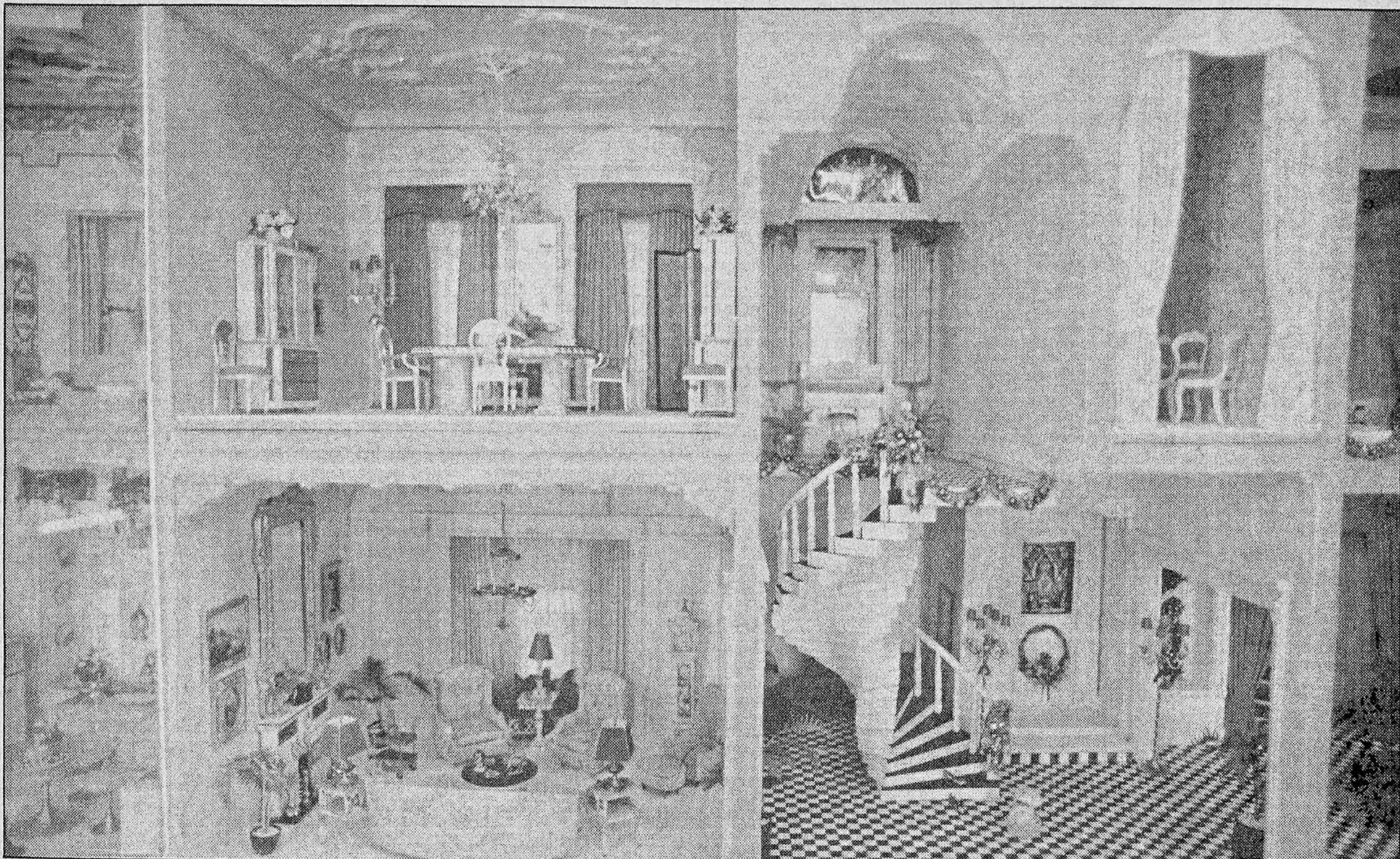
"First," she explained, "ours is the only show in Los Angeles. It's not in Orange County, which has always been the hub of miniature collecting in Southern California. Second, in just a couple of years our club has earned a reputation for putting on a really fine, organized show."

One special feature is the exhibition in the Rotunda Room, which is open to the public at no charge.

"Last year, we had all kinds of people dropping by just to look," she said. "Of course, we're delighted when they decide to buy a ticket and see the rest." Tickets to the main show are \$4. Munchkins under 12 with an adult get in free.

The exhibits in the Rotunda, about half of them created by the club members, display various

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Eleanor LaVove, at top is curator and director of Angels Attic, a museum devoted to exhibiting miniatures such as Chateau Princess Petite, above.

JOSE GALVEZ / Los Angeles Times



# MINIATURES: Tiny Collectibles on Display

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examples of the three kinds of presentations currently in vogue: doll houses, vignettes and room boxes.

Doll houses are, of course, the traditional vehicle for displaying itsy-bitsy people, chairs, beds, baskets, stoves, chandeliers, rugs, golf clubs and so on. But once the doll house has been mastered, or at least started (many miniature collectors confess to owning half-finished doll houses), most progress to experimenting with variations on the two other basic forms.

Vignettes are single scenes on a flat base, usually covered with a glass dome or plastic top. Because the scene, a child's nursery or a carpenter's workshop, for example, doesn't have walls, it can be seen from all sides.

Workshop chairman Eve Karoblis and her husband, Ed Mabe, are set painters for the motion-picture industry and prefer room boxes, one of the industry's most popular ways to show off miniatures.

The boxes, Karoblis explained, are three-sided interior scenes with an unfinished exterior, much like a movie set but in miniature. Typically, they are about 15 inches wide, 10 inches high and 12 inches deep.

"People generally pick a favorite era," Karoblis said. "It could be a Victorian or Colonial hat shop, or Madame Sophia's Palm Reading. Or it could be a Spanish courtyard, or a garage.

"Usually, the scene is a moment in time, like a blink," she added. "Maybe food is being served, or Christmas gifts are being wrapped. The general impression you get looking at it is that people have just stepped out of the room.

## Realism Vs. Fantasy

"Some people like fantasy themes, like teddy bears or a princess's room," she said. "You might have a teddy bear picnic, with landscaping and paper plates and a picnic basket. Or you could have teddy bears making cookies."

Karoblis' personal preference, however, leans to authenticity. "Our scenes, like our sets, are historical," she said. "They really existed at one time.

"One of our room boxes is an old Quonset hut that was once a sound stage. The guy living there is kind of a ne'er-do-well. You know, piles of run-down junk and old tires. Things that didn't work get pushed over to the side, and he just keeps building in the middle. But he's not there when you see it. He just went down to the local bar for a cool one."

But it is in the auditorium, where 55 dealers are showing and selling their lines of handcrafted pieces, that most of the action and excitement is generated, as hundreds of amateur doll-house owners search for just the right chairs, wallpaper and bathroom fixtures.

Show chairman Sandy Gruber, a self-confessed newcomer to the hobby, says that though miniature stores are a good place for beginners to start, and they sell some furniture and kits, collectors searching for variety and quality pieces have to shop at shows like this one.

## Dealer Specialties

"The word *dealer* sounds commercial," she said, "but in the world of miniatures, it means craftspeople who make things to sell to other people, as well as for themselves. The things our dealers make you can't buy in stores."

Lumber, for instance. Steve Goode, the lumber man, sells all kinds of special lumber, in different grades and exotic woods, for baseboards, crown moldings and parquet floors.

Or Karen Sue Haynie of El Paso, Tex., who makes and sells architectural details like picture moldings, exterior friezes and gingerbread for Victorian doll houses. Or Charlotte Halley of Carson, who carves and paints cats of all breeds and colors, to snooze on your mini-bed or purr beside your tiny fireplace.

Roger and Lealani Warling of West Hills in Canoga Park sell several lines of woven wicker furniture, including chairs, sofas, end tables, baby buggies and baskets.

"We're doing wicker picnic baskets and fluffy lamb pull-toys at a Make-It-and-Take-It table," she said. "The more people get interested in this, the better it is for all of us. I love to have people learn the right way to make wicker."

Projects going on between 11 a.m. and 3 p.m. at the other Make-It-and-Take-It tables include a fabric lamp shade; a gift box folded out of mini-wallpaper; five wood kits—a magazine rack, step-stool, sleigh, cradle and child's potty chair—from Sam (the Wood Man) Zambrano; and Joe Hermes demonstrating how to use "foam core," a special building material favored by craftsmen.

Some of the finest furniture sold at the show is crafted by Gilbert Mena from Huntington Park. "His things are exquisite, really wonderful," Karoblis said. And they are expensive.

But if Mena's work gives you a taste for the best in miniatures, your next stop should be a visit to Angels Attic, a miniature and doll-house museum in Santa Monica.

## Thousands of Single Items

One of just three museums in the United States devoted exclusively to miniatures, Angels Attic has on display 60 rare and antique doll houses, 75 room boxes and thousands of single items. It also owns and sells furniture made by famous contemporary artists like Gerald Crawford.

Crawford, the official miniaturist of the Winterthur Museum and Gardens in Delaware, creates furniture that not only looks authentic but employs construction and decorative details found in full-size originals: hand-turned chair legs, dove-tailed drawers and petit point upholstery.

"Gerald built a grandfather clock last year that actually runs," said Eleanor LaVove, curator and director of the museum.

"He didn't think he'd sell many of them; then 22 were sold at \$2,000 or more each. They're expensive, but they're truly collector's items."

What's behind the growing interest in miniatures? Some observers see it as part of recent trends toward minimalism in art. LaVove, a collector herself, thinks some people are just born collectors, and that tiny things have something special about them.

Karoblis thinks that some of the appeal is the chance to re-create something you can't do in real life.

"Not too many people have teddy bears whipping up cookies in the kitchen," she said, "but if we've read a story about it, or played a game about it as children, we can put it in a room box and enjoy it just as much."

*The Veterans Memorial Auditorium is at 10858 Culver Blvd., Culver City. Angels Attic, 516 Colorado Ave., Santa Monica, is open Thursday through Sunday, 12:30-4:30 p.m. Admission is \$3 for adults, \$2 for seniors 65 and older, \$1 for children younger than 12. Information: (213) 394-8331.*