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# Miniature Monuments

By Andrew Blankstein

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From his converted workshop garage, Anthony Tremblay has a terrific view of Los Angeles City Hall—not to mention Iraq's Great Mosque of Samara and the Mayan Pyramid of Quetzalcoatl.

He also can see the ornamental windows on New York's Flatiron building, and the weathered limestone of the Great Pyramid of Khafre.

No, he's not operating spy satellites. Rather, the Burbank production designer spends his off-hours crafting these and other famous edifices, then selling the tiny metal-plated and bronze-cast creations to selected collectors and museums.

"It started off as a hobby but it's been snowballing into a part-time career," said Tremblay, whose miniature buildings are sold under a company aptly called Microcosms (small worlds).

Those who follow the nation's souvenir building market are the first to acknowledge the genre is by no means huge. And Tremblay admits he isn't quite ready to walk away from his day job as film and television set designer.

Still, over the last three years, his hobby has earned him enough profits to construct a workshop studio and plow money back into new equipment.

Moreover, the 36-year-old Tremblay is steadily gaining a reputation as one of the top miniature-building designers in the United States, according to David Weingarten, an Oakland-based architect who also co-authored a book on souvenir structures.

And part of his accomplishment has been perfecting a relatively new and low-cost production technique.

"Tony has moved the whole thing forward because he's made [the craft] accessible to people who would like to commission a souvenir building," Weingarten said.

"A few years ago, you had to be a bank to commission a piece because it was so prohibitively expensive. His method is simultaneously high-tech, low-tech and cheap."

Tremblay's Burbank home is almost a shrine to miniatures he has collected over the years—from intricately detailed pieces such as the Milan Cathedral to mass-produced pot-metal pieces like New York's Statue of Liberty and Empire State Building.

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It was his love of collecting and his inability to hunt down certain buildings that led to the formation of Microcosms three years ago: Tremblay collected more than 200 buildings but couldn't find souvenirs of Los Angeles landmarks.

"When I first started looking for souvenir replicas of Los Angeles buildings, there was nothing available," Tremblay said. "The first thing I wanted to do is put Los Angeles on the map."

From Griffith Park Observatory, his first piece, Tremblay has gone on to reproduce architectural attractions such as Los Angeles City Hall, the Capitol Records building and the Central Library.

"I had seen very few miniaturized buildings but was charmed at the idea of transforming Griffith Observatory into its table-top version," said Ed Krupp, director of Griffith Observatory, which sells Tremblay's pieces in its gift shop. "The lines and the solidity of the model we commissioned conveys the true feeling of this building."

Other Microcosms offerings include the Transamerica Building in San Francisco, the Flatiron Building and former Singer building in New York City and Great Pyramid of Khafre on the Giza plateau.

"My pieces are larger, more substantial and have a lot of attention to detail and proportion," Tremblay said. "That's sort of the niche I'm filling, collectors who appreciate accurate replicas."

Tremblay, a Manchester, N.H. native, dreams up the designs and markets the final product.

Tremblay's work begins by searching book stores and libraries for detailed drawings of famous buildings. From there, he constructs a cardboard "study model" for what will be the first in a series of steps to arrive at the final pattern.

He takes details from the model and the plans, entering them into a computer, which he uses to create two-dimensional line art "elevations."

Tremblay also utilizes his friend, computer graphic artist Bryan Ledford and others, to plot doors, windows and minute details on the computer.

The computer-generated images are then used to create detailed etchings, which are used to make three-dimensional molds.

The models are cast in pewter at local foundries in Burbank and North Hollywood in lots of 75 to 100 pieces. Typically, they are plated in micro-thin layers of gold and silver and copper. A few are cast in bronze.

Producing a new building takes about five weeks from beginning to end, Tremblay said.

The miniatures, which can range from 2 inches to 7 inches tall and up 5 inches in width, retail for between \$45 and \$75. They are bought by dedicated collectors either directly from Tremblay or at gift shops located in several of the buildings he has modeled.

To get the word out on his works, Tremblay uses the Internet, collector newsletters and word-of-mouth.

"I don't expect it to be as popular as coin collecting," Tremblay said. "But anyone who starts collecting these replicas could find it just as educational."

Tremblay has produced 17 buildings and plans to add St. Paul's Cathedral, the **Chrysler** building and the Chicago Tribune Tower.

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In his book titled "Souvenir Building-Miniature Monuments," Weingarten traces the rise of the souvenir building trade as far back as the first half of the 19th century, coinciding with the rise of tourism, which until then was limited to either business travelers or the "the well-to-do."

The souvenirs, "were a piece of history" something that tourists "could remember the good times in far-away places," Weingarten wrote.

The industry's growing popularity was underscored in 1885 when 50,000 miniatures of the Statue of Liberty were sold at \$1 a piece to raise money for the base of the structure, according to Weingarten. Such collectibles were made from inexpensive lead castings and were sold in great volume.

With the dawn of the 20th century, souvenir buildings took on an expanded role as banks, insurance companies and other U.S. industries used them to show off their buildings.

But that phenomenon was limited to the U.S., says Weingarten. In Europe, miniatures focused on public buildings in line with the great cathedrals and other architectural treasures.

By the 1980s, the popularity of miniatures was running out of steam. Metal casting were becoming prohibitively expensive. There were also concerns about high lead content.

"At that point very, very few souvenir buildings were finding their way into the world," Weingarten said. "And those that were made were of loathsome quality. They were pieces of junk."

That's turning around, however, with designers like Tremblay, he said.

"I'm a huge fan of what he's doing," Weingarten said. "He's the very best. He's reinvigorated a tradition that's 175 years old, making pieces that involved craft."

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