



FOR COLLECTORS OF THE FINE AND DECORATIVE ARTS

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MISCELLANEOUS

Master of Miniatures
By: David Lansing
April 2008

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Veteran entertainment executive Ken Williams is the first to admit that a decade-long obsession turned him into a bit of a bad boy. Perched on a sofa next to Jann, his wife of 18 years, he takes a deep breath, then sheepishly confesses: "It's a bit embarrassing to talk about, but at one point, I was sneaking stuff into the house in the middle of the night." He pauses, glancing thoughtfully at his wife, before admitting, "I just didn't want her to know."

So what, you wonder, was the mauvais garçon of Bel-Air spiriting out of the trunk of his Mercedes under the cover of darkness? Little replicas of the Eiffel Tower. And the Leaning Tower of Pisa. As well as Lenin's Tomb, the Rose Bowl and even the Brooklyn Bridge (yes, someone really sold Ken, the former senior vice president and treasurer of Columbia Pictures Entertainment in New York, the Brooklyn Bridge). In fact, over the last 12 years or so, Ken has collected well over a thousand miniature buildings, spanning the range from elegant mid 19th-century European Grand Tour souvenirs originally sold to upper-class Americans and Brits, to bank replicas given as depositor premiums, to today's street version of the Empire State Building.

"It was like having rabbits in the house," says Jann, an architect. "They just kept popping up. I knew he was sneaking them in but he wouldn't admit it. I'd say, 'That's new, isn't it?' and he'd go, 'Oh no, you just haven't noticed it before.'" Not that Jann wasn't a bit of an enabler herself. After all, she's the one who, several years ago, orchestrated the remodeling of their spacious L.A. home, tucked away in a quiet neighborhood with views overlooking the Los Angeles Country Club and Century City beyond, into a sort of quasi-museum for Ken's growing collection, which spills over bookcases and climbs the walls of a two-story-high library specially designed to showcase his little Gothic churches, Beaux-Arts style banks, classic monuments, World's Fair theme buildings and such prized oddities as a replica of Hitler's Bavarian summer house.

According to the souvenir building bible, Monumental Miniatures by Margaret Majua and David Weingarten, the production of mass-produced miniature buildings began in the first part of the 19th century and coincided with "the rise of European tourism as a popular pastime." Travelers would head off for Rome or Paris or London and bring back a miniature of some classic building—Rome's Temple of Hercules, for example, or London's Cleopatra's Needle—as a souvenir of their visit. One of the biggest manufacturers of souvenir buildings was Kronheimer & Oldenbush, German immigrants who opened a factory in Manhattan in 1895. Their miniatures, cast in lead and plated in silver, copper, brass or gold, are unmatched in detail and finish. Unfortunately, the firm was a casualty of World War II and closed in 1942, under pressure to eliminate non-essential production. In fact, the war brought an end to most souvenir building manufacturers worldwide. A renaissance was sparked in the mid-1970s with the publication of Dort Brown's modest pamphlet Souvenir Buildings: A Collection of Identified Miniatures. For the first time, values were suggested for such rarities as a 1930s Chrysler Building (\$8) and a lighter representing the Frank Lloyd Wright-designed Johnson Wax Tower in Racine, Wisconsin (\$15). Prices have skyrocketed since, with the more desirable buildings now selling for \$1,000 or more.

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Ken began collecting miniatures during a stint as president of the Los Angeles Conservancy. "There was a woman on the board who had a collection of these buildings, and I became fascinated," he says. "I travel a lot and had seen many of the original buildings and monuments, and I just thought, 'Wouldn't it be fun to bring some of these home?'"

Like a proud father bragging about his children, Ken is hesitant to point to a favorite. But by looking at which pieces get the limelight, one can figure it out. There's the 19th-century commemorative campanile of the Florence Duomo, for instance, prominently placed on the library mantelpiece, custom-designed by Jann to display miniatures. "I've never seen another like it on this scale" he says.

And then there's the rare two-foot-high Nelson's Column in Trafalgar Square, from the mid-19th century. Ken calls it an "absolutely stunning gilded bronze" and points out that the relief work "is every bit as perfect as the original in London." He owns dozens of columns and obelisks of all sizes from the Grand Tour, which spill out of the library into the living room foyer.

Not that he collects only rare items. He owns dozens of miniature Statues of Liberty, for instance, ranging from one made for American donors by sculptor Frédéric Auguste Bartholdi to raise construction funds for the base, to "a pretty crummy replica I bought last year in New York."

Each piece in Ken's collection has a story. Some he knows; some he has to guess—like that of the miniature of the Johnson Wax Building. Picking it up, Ken flips back the top of the squared-off tower to reveal a cigarette lighter. "This building was completed toward the end of the Great Depression," he says, "and this lighter was probably given to executives on the top floors to celebrate—what? Maybe a good year of sales or maybe just to acknowledge that things were starting to look up. But can't you just imagine some Babbitt-like businessman kicking back at his desk and taking great pleasure in this little memento as he lit his cigar?"

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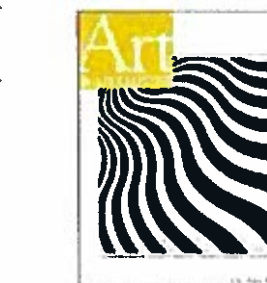
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Other pieces had similar practical applications. A Leaning Tower of Pisa in gilded silver with turquoise stones is a lipstick holder. A miniature temple of Angkor Wat is an inkwell. And a replica of the Goodyear zeppelin hangar in Akron, Ohio, is an ashtray for cigars. And still more functioned as bookends, clocks, salt-and-pepper shakers, thermometers and pencil sharpeners.

Ken's sentimental favorites are the coin banks, many made in the 1920s and '30s by Chicago manufacturer A.C. Rehberger. Once given away by banks and savings institutions, these pieces now command a hefty premium from dealers and fellow collectors... Ken started his career as a banker for Chase Manhattan.

"Ken's miniatures really are evocative and inspire these great conversations," Jann says. "You bring a complete stranger here and they pick up a piece and start telling you stories about traveling to Europe or going to the World's Fair. Within minutes, you have something in common."

And does Ken, who has no idea how many monumental miniatures he actually has, plan to stop collecting soon? "Probably," he says. "In fact, I've got so many pieces stored in the basement that I think it may be time to get rid of some of them—at least the stuff I'm not really crazy about."

But Jann looks dubious. "He's been saying that for years," she says. "But it's all right. What's wrong with owning 20 or 30 copies of the Eiffel Tower?"

David Lansing writes on architecture and interior design for the Los Angeles Times and other publications.

RESOURCES

aceland.com. Souvenir buildings.

banthrico.com. Collectible metal coin banks.

Monumental Miniatures: Souvenir Buildings from the Collection of Ace Architects by Margaret Majua and David Weingarten (Antique Trader Books; 1999).

The Souvenir Building Collectors Society. sbcollectors.org. Annual convention, Charlottesville, Va. May 30–June 1, 2008.

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