The Day the Diorama Died

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Museums still rely on spatial environments that have their origins in the diorama. The Forest Gallery at Melbourne Museum takes the notion of immersion to another level, using landscape architecture and senses such as scent and sensitivity to temperature to affect our experience. Whereas the subjects of traditional diorama artworks are kept apart in time and space, a visitor to the Forest Gallery is taken through time seamlessly. The ‘old’ Academy of Sciences in San Francisco had a diorama hall in which the windows took the visitor back through time to view past epochs. The strength of the Forest Gallery, is the visitor’s journey through time, from Gondwana, to the appearance of flowering plants in Australia and onwards through time to experience the impact of bushfire on human occupation. And each period is reinforced with radically compressed views that are the equivalent to those provided in front of each alcove in a hall of dioramas.

The out-dated notion of macho- heroism fed the production of the classical diorama. Dioramas were often used to depict fierce animals at close range. The spirit of the legendary hunter and conservationist Carl Akeley now hangs in the dioramas in the American Museum of Natural History in New York. Akeley’s career was marked by a compulsion for misadventure, including the killing of a leopard with his bare hands. When he died on expedition, his companions entered him in the very site that was featured in his celebrated diorama of Mountain Gorillas. Fortunately perhaps, the natural history documentary has supplanted the diorama as the means by which we can all have a privileged experience of rare or perilous nature.

The diorama expired unexpectedly on the day when movement was introduced behind the alcove. While acknowledging that extinction is the flip side of evolution, should we be concerned about the rate of extinction?

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Diminutive objects and tableaux draw us into the arrested life of the miniature. They are even more appealing when the craft of their making is bogging in its detail. But, after the initial allure has passed, why do we still find small creations fascinating? Linda Young has some ideas on the appeal of miniatures.

Think of a kitten, a netsuke, a postage stamp: why are small things so appealing? A model train, a doll’s house, a miniature village: they are irresistibly engaging.

To my mind, the main reason has to be that the sense of scale on the miniature is so much bigger than it is. As the adult is to the child, bigness makes one capable and independent. To put it crudely, the big have power over the small. And a sense of power, or at least agency, is a deeply satisfying assurance in human consciousness. The child who plays with toy models not only learns cultural norms and develops motor skills to handle the material particularities of the adult world, but builds confidence in controlling the apparatus of adult life. Thus, to manipulate a miniature is to assert mastery in the world. Remember what a delight it was to build a sandcastle, and the equal pleasure of knocking it down?

The model train landscape and the doll’s house are archetypes of the gratification of controlling miniature things. I vividly recall my lust and amazement on being introduced to my grandmother’s doll’s house at about eight years old. The way the façade doors swung open on the furnished rooms filled my fingers with the glorious power to assert my understanding of what the world should be. I soon learned that the playhouse was the model universe transmutes the joy of improving and adorning it. The doll’s house (ill. c.1908) received a total roulpeostyling that Christmas.

The capacity to create is one means by which adults can maintain legitimate interaction with the toy world. Crafting miniature locomotives or furnishing is satisfyingly creative, highlighting the appealing characteristics of intracity and workmanship. These qualities introduce an aesthetic dimension to the satisfactions of psychic control—and perhaps (as we get accustomed to having some agency in the world) they become the dominant mode of adult appreciation of small things. Two categories of small things can be distinguished in this context: the utilitarian and the frivolous, and beauty can be found in both. Clockwork mechanisms conjure the first. Intricately beautiful in their functional application in clocks, clockwork motors led by mainsprings also powered the exquisitely frivolous species of 18th-century miniature automata emasculated by German singing birds. In fact, clockwork is often at the heart of the miniature, enhancing the fascination of the small artefact by mobilising it.

Frivolous miniatures have long been produced in popular and luxury.registers. Miniature books epitomise the genre, with no earthly use but to incite wonder and delight. A tiny book is a virtuoso printing job; to enhance its magic, bindings have often been produced in fine and precious materials. The book’s content may be sacred a miniature Bible or deliberately big to contrast with its physical scale (Shakespeare). Validated by meaningful content, though effectively inaccessible for actual reading, miniature books bear between the toy and the talisman.

Miniature artworks contain a similar spectrum of values but their small size can also be functional. Some artworks are miniature in scale and some are miniature versions of usual proportions. The decorations in medieval books are known generally as miniatures because they ornament small spaces in relatively large and small (though not miniature) books. They are grace notes to the text, often unconnected to the meaning, but ornamental, playful or even pyjio. By contrast the predominant form of historical artwork worked in miniature was the portrait, mandated by affordability, portability and intimate access—the opposite of a grand, large portrait. A portrait miniature was usually precious for the sake of sentiment and its small scale made it possible to carry and even wear. The growing affluence of the folk of the 18th century enabled them to adopt the 14th century aristocratic taste for miniatures, and miniature painting thrived until it was displaced by photography in the 1840s.

The private scope of the English miniature made it a permissible art for women to work at, although men always dominated the professional ranks. Jane Austen described her style of writing as ‘the little bit of ivory with which I work with so fine a brush, as produces (little effect after much labour),’ which suggests the delicate in an artist aims to achieve. Here, the miniature scale seems to connect to childhood experience, expressing the restricted compass and the lack of power of children and women. So, is the miniature powerless? Well, yes and no. The potency of the miniature works through charm and imaginative seduction, one of the traditional wiles of women. If we neutralise the sexist habit, the strength and authority of the miniature is probably delight. Enjoy!

In the grown-up world the miniature village or park demonstrates the attraction in an adult way. Probably derived from 19th century origins and surging in the immediate post WW2 period, miniature villages are carefully constructed objects of pleasure produced as spectacles for leisureed consumption. Cockington Green in Canberra is an Australian specimen. It opened in 1979, a picture postcard English village modelled at 1/12th scale, set in gardens of dwarf grass, bonsai tress and annual flowers. In 1998 it added an international area with variously scaled models sponsored by national embassies. Visitors have posted a multitude of photos online, some record each structure in the site, others focus on the inverted reality of adults and children towering over architecture. Both forms—the cataloguing and the jiking—indicate the imaginative pleasure of unexpected scale.

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For more about Cockington Green visit: [http://www.cockingtongreen.com.au]

For more about the Mirror of the World Exhibition: [http://www.slv.vic.gov.au/event/mirror-world]