

Decorative arts

Sharon Doddroe reports on the Kathleen Savage Browning Miniatures Collection



A 1920s-style Récamier by Herbert Hausknecht, done in original caning using pure silk thread. The Récamier day bed was named for Madame Récamier, a leader in the French literary and political circles of Paris in the 1800s.

Whether it's a stunning hand-carved gilded chair or an intricately painted porcelain vase, decorative art pieces embody the perfect symmetry of form and function. And nowhere are these masterpieces more appreciated than in the world of collectable miniatures, where artisans have painstakingly recreated some of the world's finest decorative arts in 1:12 scale.

"Decorative arts refer to items that are utilitarian in purpose, but that have been created with extraordinary quality and attention to aesthetics," explains Kaye Browning, whose personal collection of miniatures is now on public display as the Kathleen

Savage Browning Miniatures Collection [KSBMC] at the Kentucky Gateway Museum Center. She has selected and commissioned hundreds of decorative arts pieces which include furniture, textiles, silver and porcelain, and lovingly positioned them in the houses, roomboxes and vignettes throughout the 3,300-square-foot museum.

"Sometimes I see a piece and immediately know where it should go. Other times, I study a room and think, 'what is missing?' More often than not, it's a decorative arts item that completes the scene," explains Browning. She uses historical research in her creative process to get a feel for

what would be happening in the rooms at that particular point in time. Combining her love of miniatures and history has guided Browning's collection over the years, resulting in the accumulation of several exceptional decorative arts pieces.

TREASURED MINIATURES

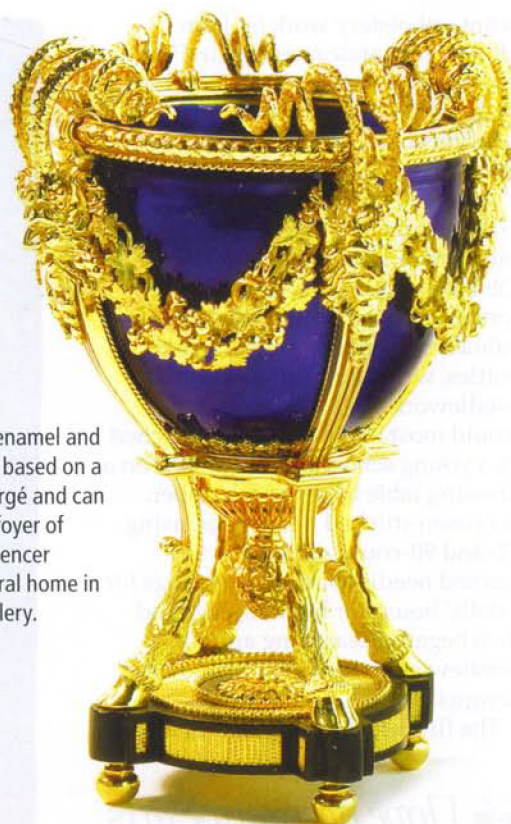
One of her most treasured items is a terrestrial globe by French artisan Pierre Mourey. The bronze statue depicts Atlas, the Greek deity of astronomy and navigation, holding a meticulously crafted sphere on his back. The miniature globe highlights the continents, meridians and parallels, and is fully functional with

PHOTOS: KIM MCKISSON

Only 12 of these ribbon-backed arm chairs were made by John Hodgson. He gave number one to the Queen – number eight can be seen in the KSBMC.



This Jens Torp enamel and 18K gold urn is based on a design by Fabergé and can be seen in the foyer of Althorp, the Spencer family's ancestral home in the KSBMC gallery.



a rotating axis and measuring rings. "What makes many of these pieces so special is not only the craftsmanship and dedication to historical accuracy, but the provenance of the original items," says Browning. Mourey's miniature is based on the work of Lartigue and Lennel who made the original terrestrial and celestial globes for Louis XVI in the late 1700s.

Other examples of Mourey's work in the KSBMC include a 17th century Antwerp-style hand-painted chest with 12 drawers and double-hinged door and a Georgian-style Adams parlour set.

Several artisans specialising in painted furniture are represented at the museum, including Renee Isabelle, James Hastrich and Natasha Beshenkovsky. Visitors will be especially delighted by Natasha's artistry on a folding screen featuring a hunt scene and on a coffee table with intricately painted floral designs.

One of Browning's favourite handpainted pieces is a schoolgirl's desk and chair painted by Mary Grady O'Brien. The chair, modelled after 1800's designs, bears an inscription and Browning's name as it was when she was a child – Kaye Savage. These personal pieces, which were handcrafted by Mark Murphy



Table by Natasha Beshenkovsky.

before being painted, represent the American folk artwork for which O'Brien is noted.

Like the terrestrial globe, some of the more prized miniatures in the decorative arts category are those that function as closely as possible to the originals. Artisan Scott Dillingham's replica of a Simon Willard-style clock is just one of those examples in Browning's collection. Constructed from Honduras mahogany, the clock

features cross band inlay with fluted columns and brass column caps and finials. The originals came from Massachusetts in the late 1700s and early 1800s.

Many visitors to the gallery create and collect decorative arts in full scale and Browning relishes their reactions to some of the detailed textiles in the KSBMC. Anyone who enjoys needlepoint is mesmerised by the 1:12 scale items, such as Sue Bakker's petit

point upholstery work on John Hodgson's handcarved chair. Petit point in full scale is smaller and finer in detail than needlepoint, so admirers of the art are even more amazed to see it in 1:12 scale.

Annelle Ferguson's adaptation of a 17th-century English casket is another excellent example of the art form. Caskets, explains Ferguson, were containers used for the safekeeping of valuables such as jewellery, scent bottles, writing equipment and needlework tools. The embroidery would most likely have been stitched by a young schoolgirl and placed on a dressing table in her bedchamber. Ferguson stitched her version using 72- and 90-count silk gauze. She learned needlepoint to create rugs for a dolls' house for her daughter and then began researching antique needlework to incorporate into her designs.

The fine art of tatting in miniature

“I love decorative arts in miniature because they always draw me into a scene”

can also be seen at the gallery in a cream coverlet by Suzane Herget. Many believe tatting, a lace-making technique using a series of knots and loops, is a dying art because of the time it takes to hand stitch the delicate lace. Herget created the coverlet using the finest silk restoration thread she could find at the time and spent more than 250 hours on the piece.

“Few give it the time and patience it requires,” explains Herget. “When a piece the size of the coverlet is finished and sold, tatters often feel they are giving a big piece of themselves away.”

SILVER & PORCELAIN

The discussion of decorative arts could never be complete without mentioning silver and porcelain pieces. Browning's collection includes several porcelain items from artisans Henny Staring-Egberts, Dominique Levy and Miyuki Nagashima, as well as work from Le Chateau Interiors, the legendary design house of Jeffrey Gueno and the late Frank Hanley.



This folding room screen features a hand-painted scene by Natasha Beshenkovsky.

“They were, in my opinion, two of the finest and most important interior decorators in the miniature field,” says Browning.

Browning is just as enthusiastic about the work of distinguished silver and goldsmith Jens Torp. He began his career in Denmark, where he was born, and went on to become a jewellery designer for DeBeers in London. He became interested in crafting miniatures after attending the London Dollshouse Festival in 1991 and has spent the past two decades researching and crafting the antique-style silver and gold pieces for which he is known. Examples of his work at the gallery include a gold gilt over sterling silver Georgian wine server, a George II basket weave jardinière, and an enamel and 18K gold urn. The urn is one of only five made and is adored by Browning not only for its beauty but for its purpose and place in times gone by.

“I love decorative arts in miniature because they always draw me into a scene. I start imagining people using

them: playing a game of chess, serving wine, placing flowers in a vase,” says Browning. “Like this sterling silver salt dip and spoon,” she adds, pointing to the smallest and most detailed piece in her collection. The Harry Smith piece rests prominently on a dining table in Spencer House, the gallery's most impressive work to date.

“I look into the room and can't help but think of Princess Diana's ancestors at the table. Perhaps they were salting their pheasant. And what would they have been wearing or discussing? Each item is so much more than a piece of art to me. It's an intimate look into history.”

CONTACT DETAILS

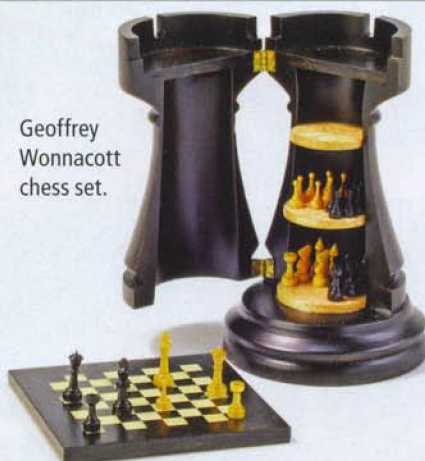
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Atlas holding a globe, by French miniaturist, Pierre Mourey.



Pierre Mourey's hand-painted 17th-century Antwerp-style chest.

Geoffrey Wonnacott chess set.



Annelle Ferguson's casket jewellery box in needlepoint.



Porcelain bowl by Le Chateau Interiors.



Sue Bakker's petitpoint upholstery on a John Hodgson handcarved chair.



Jens Torp's George II basketweave jardinière



Scott Dillingham's replica of a Simon Willard-style clock.

