

## Against the Grain

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### Wandering the Web--Sociocultural Hobby Sites: Acquisitions and Decoration of Dollhouses and Minature Displays as a Fun Educational Tool

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# Wandering the Web — Sociocultural Hobby Sites: Acquisition and Decoration of Dollhouses and Miniature Displays as a Fun Educational Tool

by **Lesley L. R. Montgomery** (Library Assistant at Western Kentucky University Libraries, Special Collections Library, Bowling Green, Kentucky) <lesley.montgomery@wku.edu>

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**Author's Note:** *In 1959, I was gifted my first dollhouse, a shining, aluminum wonder, with its lithographed wall scenes redolent of the USA's post-war prosperity: a nursery overflowing with out-of-scale toys; two-dimensional kitchen counters with a garish basket of fruit; figurative representations of bright bathroom fixtures and luxurious towels; and an attached garage, with walls portraying every tool the plastic father of the house possibly could need to maintain his tin kingdom.*

*I still own my second dollhouse, a 1961 Christmas present. The **Rich Toys** brand, a Colonial mansion, is a masonite house proudly displaying four white, Doric columns that extend to the second-story front overhang. Even as a five-year-old, I realized the two chimneys, with no actual fireplaces inside the domicile, and the painted-on front door were pale shadows of a "real" house. Also, it did not go unnoticed that some of my friends' older siblings owned dollhouses from over a decade earlier that had actual staircases and functioning front doors. Still, my dollhouse lent me hours of pleasure and allowed my imagination to soar. I affixed black-flecked, turquoise-colored adhesive paper on the bathroom walls, attached pieces of eyelet lace above plastic window inserts with Elmer's glue, and crudely laid self-sticking drawer liners imitating wood grain in the kitchen and living rooms. I now look in horror at these innocent enhancements, knowing as all fans of PBS's popular **Antiques Roadshow** know: Do not ever embellish antiques, especially with nonremovable adhesive papers!*

*All this being said, I would like to state unequivocally that my early experience with collecting and decorating dollhouses was a magical and educational activity, providing immeasurable joy and a strong sense of cultural awareness. Acquiring and creating miniature displays can be a learning tool, teaching the collector much about our current culture, as well as about the history of past decades. Today's collectors of vintage dollhouses are true social historians, carefully choosing the décor that evokes the essence of their favorite period, be it the 1950s with its acquisitive ambiance, the 1920s' through 1930s' cozy interiors with lead-based **Tootsie Toy** furniture, or more exotic — and far more expensive — wood and paper **Bliss** dollhouses from the advent of the commercial dollhouses era.*

*Modern collectors have a loyalty and zeal for their hobby of choice. They passionately compose Websites on the Internet for others' amusement and awe. They write blogs with photographs of modern dollhouses they have created from **Crate & Barrel** wooden tissue box covers or of early 20th-century homes accurately decorated with priceless miniatures and antique bed linens. In this article, I hope to share some of these excellent Websites, blogs, eZine articles, Flickr or Pinterest photo albums, DIY videos, hobby club links, and even a stop-photography site of an early British dolls' house television series. This article will not include the proliferation of online commercial miniatures supplies dealers, as these are stores, rather than bona fide hobby sites. May you find as much joy in browsing through these collectible dollhouse and miniatures display sites and do-it-yourself Web pages, as I have enjoyed compiling them for you and your library patrons! — LM*

## History of Dollhouses and Furnishings

Let me first whet the reader's appetite with a 2:15-minute video link at <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/video/Inside-American-Historys-Dollhouse.html>. This thoughtful movie clip — created by the **George Washington University**, Semester in Washington Journalism

Program in November 2010 — features the early 20th-century dollhouse of the famous miniaturist, **Faith Bradford**. The film footage reviews the miniatures collection of **Ms. Bradford**, including some items that she played with when she was seven-years-old, and which she expanded upon throughout her life. **Ms. Bradford's** five-story dollhouse was acquired by the venerable **Smithsonian Institute's National Museum of American History** in 1951. This gift was accepted by **Margaret Brown Klaphor**, an expert on White House history and the **Smithsonian's** First Ladies collection curator. It is aptly described by current curator **Larry Bird** as, "one of the most visited and commented upon and popular attractions in all of the **Smithsonian**, and so it's been continuously displayed, ever since then ... and I think it's worthwhile, even if you're just a casual visitor or a museum professional, to study it and understand why it works. People bring an emotional attachment to miniatures." Please note that it takes about a minute to upload this audiovisual encapsulation of how and why dollhouse miniatures are a worthwhile topic of study. I also would recommend the accompanying link, <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/Welcome-to-the-Dollhouse.html>, with an informative article about **Faith Bradford**, a retired librarian who **Mr. Bird** notes, "was the first woman to head a division of the **Library of Congress**, the Card Catalogue Division." Lastly, your patrons can follow the **Smithsonian**: @SmithsonianMag on Twitter, as well as Liking the museum on Facebook, and it is publicly recommended on Google, Reddit, Digg, StumbleUpon, and other social bookmarks. Curator **Bird's** publication, *America's Dollhouse: The Miniature World of Faith Bradford* by **William L. Bird**, **Princeton Architectural Press**, 2010, has a link on the **Smithsonian** Websites.

The online article by **Jennifer McKendry**, *A History of Dollhouses & Furnishings 1890-1990* at the link <http://www.mckendry.net/DOLLHOUSES/1890s.htm>, provides an invaluable source of information for dollhouse collectors, creators of period miniatures, as well as those interested in social history. **Ms. McKendry's** illustrative and well-cited photographs are an excellent accompaniment to her solid historical research. Her introductory excerpt states this Website gives "Selected examples of factory and home-made dollhouses and furnishings, illustrating trends in fashion each decade from 1890 to 1990." I have been using this site for quite a few years for my personal research and have never experienced difficulties with accessing the many links. Along with the historical dissertations, which deserve a thorough perusal by the interested reader, this Website provides a lovely Gallery of Images, carefully indexed by topic (Section 1 is a cupboard dollhouse; Section 2 has a variety of antique dollhouses; Section 3 contains farm buildings & animals, etc.). **Ms. McKendry** also has a link to References on Dollhouses and Furnishings, listed by authors' surnames in alphabetical order, including **Faith Bradford's** *The Dolls' House*, 1965, and books by the equally renowned miniaturist, **Flora Gill Jacobs**, the curator of the **Washington (D.C.) Dolls' House & Toy Museum**, sadly now closed down by **Ms. Jacobs** in May 2012, due to high costs and her advancing years. (She was 85-years-old when she closed the doors to her museum and put the contents up for auction. A link pertaining to the former museum can be found at <http://dollmuseum.blogspot.com/2012/04/more-flora-gill-jacobs-history.html>.)

Multi-linked sites, such as [http://www.dollhouse-info.co.uk/interesting\\_links.htm](http://www.dollhouse-info.co.uk/interesting_links.htm), entitled *Dollhouse-Info, Interesting Links*, with

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## Blurring Lines from page 56

### A Revenue Generating Future

The type of output may well go a long way in determining the model used most widely to bring open access eBooks to the library. Scholarly works, especially scholarly works that have little or no revenue-generating potential beyond the library, will provide fertile testing ground for crowd-funded models that build in some author remuneration. E-textbooks, with the potential for wide global adoption and use, provide ample space for experimentation with business models that combine crowd-funding and freemium plays. But I think it is too easy to draw a line between scholarly content and learning content and suggest that the two necessarily require different business models to fully propagate open access. We should be scanning the university and library business environment constantly for new approaches to open access eBook publishing that have a monetization model at their core. We need a model that fairly rewards authors for writing and publishers for vetting, curating, and bringing to market and ensures as affordable a price as possible for all university libraries world-wide. And I believe we need to break down the walls between scholarly, professional, and learning eBook publishing to uncover a business model that drives us forward. 🐿



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## Wandering the Web from page 58

784,782 site meter hits at the time this article was written, provide researchers with a wealth of community-driven links. The originator of this particular site states, "If you wish a link included on this page please email us [includes a connecting link for their email] with the details ... If you find an error on this page or that a Website no longer exists or has changed or clearly isn't suitable please let us know. We will also delete any sites that subject the visitor to irritating 'pop ups.' Please note that these are the descriptions given to us by the site owners, and *Dollhouse-Info* takes no responsibility for anything on those sites." This British Website indexes both Non-commercial and Commercial dollhouse/minature Websites. At <http://www.dollhouse-info.co.uk/>, launched in July 2000, *Dollhouse-Info* will privately sell dolls' houses (the British term for dollhouse) for a £9.50 entry fee, plus four images for a full year. They also have started a site dedicated to dollhouses in the USA at <http://www.dollhouse-info.com>. Unfortunately, this link is essentially non-functioning, and the site owners have posted apologies for their photograph gallery not uploading correctly; it appears they have been trying since 2011. Other connecting links to the [http://www.dollhouse-info.co.uk/interesting\\_links.htm](http://www.dollhouse-info.co.uk/interesting_links.htm) site are problematic, as well, either taking too long to access or simply not appearing, leaving the user with a blank screen. This is a good example of very well-intentioned Website owners perhaps spreading themselves too thin by adding extra pages, causing the researcher to go further and further onto extraneous Websites.

A July 2013 posting by a blogger, **Gwendolyn Faye**, offers an interesting article on *Little Lessons; A Fascinating History of the Doll's House*, written by **Erica Washington**. The link at <http://smallissimo.com/blog/learn/little-lesson-the-history-of-miniatures/> reveals archaeologists have discovered 5,000-year-old Egyptian miniature replicas of their deceased pharaohs' favorite things. These tiny hand-carved representations of servants, pets, furnishings, etc., were made to accompany the king in his afterlife. Later, during the 1500s-1600s, members of the higher social ranks would collect souvenirs from

foreign travels, such as small rugs and tapestries, wooden furniture, and miniscule glassware. Children were either banned from playing with the miniatures and cabinet houses or were closely supervised. From 1600-1900, daughters of the elite sometimes were allowed to observe the dolls' houses at close range, if only to learn womanly housekeeping skills from their upper class mothers. The blog site [http://sewdolls.blogspot.com/2008/10/antique-dutch-doll-house-of-petronella\\_24.html](http://sewdolls.blogspot.com/2008/10/antique-dutch-doll-house-of-petronella_24.html) features close-up views of the famous antique Dutch doll house of **Petronella Dunois**, c. 1676, constructed one year prior to her marriage in 1677. The wonderful laundry room in the attic tells the story of early Dutch homes' more domestic customs, such as hanging wet clothing to dry on long clothing poles in the hot room at the top of the house. As late as the 19th century, European women would have tea parties and invite their friends, often wives who were no more than children themselves, to play with their cabinet houses after having pastries and tea. Their children were not allowed to play with their mothers' dollhouses without adult supervision. It was not until the modern era, with its manufactured wooden crate homes and paperboard houses, along with furniture made of paper, cardboard, and French tin penny toys, that dollhouses came to be the playthings of children! The **Dowst Manufacturing Company** of Chicago, the folks who brought us those wonderful die cast **Cracker Jack** trinkets, also produced a popular line of inexpensive **Tootsie Toy** furniture. These fragile playthings are not the purview of today's children, as evidenced by the collection of complete boxed sets of **Tootsie Toy** dollhouse furniture, circa 1938, that was appraised on the **Antiques Roadshow** in 2009 at \$2,500-\$3,000! <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/roadshow/archive/200804A19.html> By the 1940s, such companies as **Strombecker** were manufacturing simple but attractive wooden furniture, which is still accessible today on eBay and Etsy at reasonable prices. The 1940s-1950s era of **Renwal**, **Superior**, and other brands of plastic furniture reached its apex in 1964, when the **Ideal Toy Company** introduced **Petite Princess** furniture, a line of "Fantasy Furniture," gaudy by today's standards. No holds were barred by toy manufacturers to raise sales of inexpensive dollhouses and accessories to the Baby Boomer market, numbering 76 million in 1964!

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### Useful blogs, eZine Articles and Online Photograph Albums

Sites useful to the collector or creator of dollhouses include <http://my-vintage-dollhouses.blogspot.com/>. *My Vintage Dollhouses* is one of my all-time favorite blogs, started by **Florine** in the USA in August 2009. She never fails to amuse and educate, with an intensely personal passion for researching and presenting her newest purchases. This “Out of control collector of dollhouses...” with her “OMG, I love dollhouses!” attitude on her profile bio says it all. The densely packed site, with links that are sometimes understandably a bit slow to upload, contains much useful information, along with hysterically funny scenarios. This blogger tells wonderful stories about the various characters’ shenanigans in her fully-furnished homes. Occasionally, this is a truly adult site, with political messages given in the venue of her world of miniatures, such as celluloid dollhouse figurines’ protests over the Texas Governor’s so-called war on women: <http://my-vintage-dollhouses.blogspot.com/search/label/Adda-Room> (“members of S.A.L. (Seniors Are Liberal) group at Shady Acres Retirement Home are returning from participating in a peaceful assembly protesting what they consider their governor’s war on women.”)

Other blogs, articles, and photograph albums that are accessible, useful, and interesting include: <http://rebeccacollections.blogspot.com/>. **Rebecca** lived in Papua New Guinea during the 1970s and provides excellent links to European dolls’ house Websites. As well, she documents an interesting history of **Mrs. Oswald Gibson** of Melbourne, Victoria, who raised funds during WWII, making several dolls’ houses and two shopping centres to sell at fund-raising raffles. The Flickr link found at <http://www.flickr.com/photos/dolldwellings/7667856820/in/set-72157630801836336/>, displays photographs of **Carrie Walter Stettheimer’s** dollhouse that she created and decorated during the 1920s and 1930s. This remarkable dollhouse features original miniatures by some of her friends, such as paintings by **Marcel Duchamp**. *Corey Moortgat, Mother. Wife. Artist. Collector.* blog is perfectly charming

### Little Red Herrings from page 64

every annual convention and every national election. Rather than suck up to both parties and hope for the best, we often draw lines in the sand about first one thing and then another, leaving the preferred side silent while making the opposition furious with us enough to want to shut us down. Makes perfect sense in a time of tight budgets and scarce dollars, right?

I recall a story **Michael Novak** once told me about a time when he worked for **McGovern**. After the election was over and **Nixon** had won just about every precinct in the country, they were sitting around the table, men scratching their heads and women crying. One woman look at him and, through a multitude of tears cried, “I don’t know how this happened. I don’t know anyone who voted for **Nixon**.”

Now, if you can forget for the moment that the story is about the dreaded **Nixon**, there is a moral here about groupthink. It’s easy to get tunnel vision when you look in only one direction, and no one does that worse than people who work in colleges and universities. If we really are for our constituents, then we really do have to embrace both sides, even if it means holding our noses from time to time.

I don’t think this is peculiar to librarianship as much as it is the nature of human beings. The grass is always greener everywhere else. But you’d think in an age when our very existence is being questioned, we’d be far more agreeable on just about any question, wouldn’t you? I mean, when your spouse is ready to boot you out the door, is that really the time to ask if she’s put on a few pounds?

Now is as good a time as any to be more open-minded about such things. With our profession struggling to find a niche, any niche, we can’t afford to make any enemies. And we really don’t want to be our own worst enemies by complaining about everything, asking for more money, acting as if nothing has changed in the last few decades, wanting new staff positions for every new wrinkle we can think of, and alienating every political party but one. We need to work hard to please everyone. Extra special hard.

In times like these, it’s important to remember that it really doesn’t matter who throws you a lifeline when you’re drowning.

It only matters that you end up on dry land, safe and secure. 🐘

and visually stunning in its presentation at the link <http://coreymoortgat.blogspot.com/2012/10/doll-house-tour.html>, with sweet stories about her dollhouse and its residents. <http://www.dollshousespastandpresent.com/apps/photos/album?albumid=12182024>, *Dolls House Past & Present* is “a Website and eZine about dolls’ houses: antique, vintage, and modern. Plus furniture and accessories” started by **Wendy Gater** in 2009. It is a British site with rare antique dolls’ houses and furnishings for sale, a photo and video gallery, articles, magazine index, and archives. This is a good, solid, and long-standing Website that keeps its professional appearance intact by setting parameters for its members’ use of the site. Another of my long-time favorite blogs is *Tracy’s Toys (and Some Other Stuff)* at <http://tracystoys.blogspot.com/>. *Tracy’s Toys* blogspot is particularly well-organized, given that she is a library director: <http://www.blogger.com/profile/17093220429913265429>. “I’m a library director with a background in museums as well.” Lastly, researchers can find a plethora of useful information on Pinterest, where folks make their own houses and accessories. Bloggers provide amusement for the general public with interesting photographs of their creations, including **Jenny Lawson’s** haunted dollhouse found at the link <http://kirtsy.com/2011/10/27/dollhouse-curated-by-jenny-lawson/?kp=YToxOntzOjE6ImkiO2k6MzE0Mzt9>, and how-to tips for very modern dollhouses attached to a blog at *The Call of the Small* <http://call-small.blogspot.com/2011/08/tissue-box-house-of-three.html>.

### Clubs

Sites include a historical society dedicated to promoting the accurate representation of period dollhouse scenes <http://www.cheshirehistory.org/dolls2004.htm> (**The Cheshire Historical Society** in Cheshire, Connecticut, USA). There are many dollhouse clubs and societies around the world, and it’s worth checking the Internet for your local area. You might find a group of like-minded folks with whom to share your favorite hobby.

### Videos

Videos pertaining directly to collecting antique dollhouses and miniatures include the YouTube **Amersham** dolls’ house video, uploaded in July 2009: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U1StrWYeUL4>. I am including this link, not because the house was for sale, but because the narrator describes the house ... what to look for; features denoting what decades the house was produced (1930s through 1940s); and frankly, the narrator has a lovely voice and excellent presentation of this vintage dolls’ house. *Dolls House – British Pathé* is an incredible link, with short films — some silent, some narrated — on the topic of dolls’ houses from all eras. These short movies were filmed between 1928 and 1969. <http://www.britishpathe.com/workspaces/BritishPathe/7Tbb2gvQ>

### How-to Sites

*Susan’s Mini Homes* includes an article written in November 2012, *Candy Containers as Antique Doll House Furniture* with photographs of homemade furniture from the 1870s to 1920s: <http://susanshouses.blogspot.com/2012/11/candy-containers-as-antique-doll-house.html>. *About.com Miniatures* features, among other topics, how to make custom dollhouse scale doors, windows, stairs, and other building parts in **Lesley Shepherd’s** 2010 article: <http://miniatures.about.com/od/makeminaturedisplays/tp/Make-Custom-Dollhouse-Scale-Doors-Windows-Stairs-And-Other-Building-Parts.htm>. A how-to site for tiny kitchen utensils you can make at home with non-toxic materials for little children is attractive and adorable on *Made by Joel’s* August 2013 blog: <http://madebyjoel.com/2013/08/miniature-kitchen-set.html>.

### Television Series

Just for fun, I am including a stop-photography film clip of the British dolls’ house adventure *Tottie: The Story of a Dolls’ House*, based on books by the renowned **Rumer Godden**: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8aEF-1qr4CU>. This YouTube film presents rare footage of the 1980s animation series. A 10-minute YouTube film can be found at the link <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U8f2Le2B3ok>. Information about the producers of *Tottie* and other brilliant children’s television series can be found at the link <http://www.thechestnut.com/pinny.html>. **Peter Firmin** and **Oliver Postgate** created wonderful shows for almost three decades, bringing a love for dolls’ houses and their inhabitants into the late 20th century. 🐘