

'Minis' Are In



Miniature art niche is growing.

BY JANE HART
ABN Contributing Editor

America's culture today may embrace all that is large—"super-sized meals," hypermarkets, and six-bedroom "cribs" are all the rage. Rarely do the media emphasize entities that are small, detailed and refined. But when it comes to the art world, miniature is "in." A gallery in North Carolina, for example, reports that its annual miniature art show has grown from about 100



works of art to 500, with prices ranging up to \$2,000. And a leading "miniaturist" confidently predicts that the value of contemporary art will continue to grow steadily.

For buyers and collectors, the attraction to these works of art lies not only in the beauty of detail and refinement, but in the uniqueness, preciousness and particularly in today's society—the rareness and practicality of something small.

History

Marilyn Peck, one of Australia's leading miniaturists who helped establish four Australian Miniature Art Societies, states that miniature art was probably first identified around the 7th century. Perhaps one of the more well-known traditions of miniature art is the work of Italian "illuminators"—those who created illuminated capital letters formed from gold leaf that are often found in

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Artexpo New York Proves to Be a 'Colorful Event'

JOE JANGSURAK
ABN Editor

Bold originals, metal works, celebrities and pooches, were a few of the trends at the art world's main event.

They came. They saw. And they bought—a lot. But most importantly, 39,200 attendees of the 27th annual Artexpo New York experienced the emotions evoked by the works of 2,600 artists shown by 500 exhibitors on the 294,000 square-foot show floor of the Jacob K. Javits Convention Center, during what is considered to be

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Q&A with Boots Harris

Meet Boots Harris, owner of Discovery Galleries in Bethesda, MD.

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SOLO prize winner Adrian Prisecaru paints in bold colors and thick strokes.

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▲ One of Australia's leading miniaturists, Marilyn Peck, is shown with two of her works. Left: "A Smyrna Merchant," watercolor, 3.9 x 3.9 inches. Right: "Remembering Desire," watercolor, 3.9 x 3.9 inches. Peck's "Caped Courtesan," watercolor, gold leaf and palladium, 2.9 x 3.9 inches, is shown on the cover.



*Miniature art proves
to be a profitable
niche market.
Here's why.*

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Bibles or other religious manuscripts. These illuminations, as they were called, depicted letters, biblical scenes, activities from everyday life, Christ, angels and saints. Examples of these detailed illuminated manuscripts can be viewed at the "Masterpieces in Miniature: Italian Manuscripts from the Middle Ages and Renaissance" exhibit at the Getty Museum in the Getty Center in Los Angeles, CA, through June 12. The exhibit showcases decorated manuscripts and features 13 new acquisitions in addition to selected pieces from the Getty collection of illuminated manuscripts. These works are characterized by meticulous attention to detail and fine brush strokes.

But the tradition of miniature art has evolved throughout the centuries and out of a variety of cultural traditions including England, Canada, Persia, India, Russia and others according to Peck, and she points out that all of these traditions have had a "direct influence on the contemporary miniaturist" today.

Defining Miniature Art

As miniature art has evolved as a niche in today's art market, so has its definition and presentation. Purists of miniature art honor a strict set of criteria for defining this art as specified by a number of miniature art societies around the world. Traditional criteria for defining miniature art varies among cultures and miniature societies. On the World Federation of Miniaturists Web site, The Hilliard Society of Miniaturists, UK, requires



that paintings be no larger than 5 x 7 inches, inclusive of framing. Sculptures should not be larger than six inches in any direction. There are also specific definitions and limitations around the size of content within the painting, such as the fact that portrait heads not be larger than two inches. Additionally, there are specifications for the frame around a piece of miniature art.

One of the roles of these societies is to set traditional standards for miniature art, which sets a boundary between that which is a classic piece of miniature art vs. that which is just small. Peck, who has won more than 100 Australian and international awards for her art, holds this traditional view. "If you can see all there is to see with the naked eye, it is probably a small painting," says Peck. "If you use a magnifying glass after your moment of aesthetic arrest and find there is layer upon layer of finer detail—then you have a miniature."

But as she points out, miniature art may be more loosely defined in the contemporary art gallery scene in this country. In fact, for nontraditionalists, the difference between small and miniature may hold less meaning. Melanie Smith, co-owner of the Seaside Art Gallery in Nags Head, NC, a knowledgeable seller of miniature art, is holding her gallery's 14th annual, juried International Miniature Art Show from May 7 to June 4, 2005.

When it comes to defining miniature art, Smith says, "What is small vs. miniature matters a great deal to [miniature art] societies, but not so much to me as a gallery owner. In our show, we require that paintings be no larger than 40 square inches, including the frame. No sculpture may be larger than six inches in any one direction." When developing the concept of her miniature art show, Smith and her gallery, did however, look to miniature art societies and their definitions for guidance and then adapted their own criteria.

Michael McCormick, owner of Michael McCormick Gallery in Taos, NM, also appreciates a looser interpretation of that which is miniature. McCormick held a 2004 Winter Solstice Miniature Fun Show, in which he asked artists to submit miniatures and "smalish" works. McCormick says the smallest work was 2 x 2½ inches and was titled, "The Ranchos Church," by Pat Woodall. Another piece titled, "Ava," by Miguel Martinez, was 2 x 6 inches, or about the size of a bookmark.

Although contemporary artists and gallery owners in this country may be apt to define miniature art more loosely than formal societies or other cultures, Seaside's Smith comments, "Miniature art is fine art—it is definitely not a craft." She continues, "While the judges of traditional miniature art might be interested in the detail of brush strokes and the degree of refinement of the

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Works from the International Miniature Art Show held at the Seaside Art Gallery in Nags Head, NC, included clockwise, from top left: "Pumpkins No. 44," by Janet Laird Lagassee (Maine), watercolor, 3 1/4 x 4 1/4 inches, unframed and 4 1/4 x 5 1/4 inches, framed; "The Water Jug," by Luann Bond (Ohio), acrylic, 4 x 5 inches unframed and 5 x 6 inches, framed; "Cottage," by Elizabeth Brown (England), oil, 2 1/4 x 3 1/4 inches, unframed and 5 x 6 inches, framed; "Rhythm #4," by Takeshi Yokokawa (Japan), acrylic, 4 1/4 x 3 1/4 inches, unframed and 6 1/4 x 4 1/4 inches, framed; and "Majesty," by NW Lalk (Canada), acrylic, 3 x 4 inches, unframed and 4 x 5 inches, framed.



piece, in our show they are most interested in the quality of art—presentation, execution and style. They will look at color balance, composition, perspective and all of the aspects that one would judge in a larger piece."

Peck agrees that gallery owners should judge miniature art with the same rules in art as they would apply to the judging of large works of art. "Originality should be the more important criterion, rather than how many brushstrokes are applied to the square inch."

Marketing Miniature Art

The collector of miniature art is attracted to both its beauty and practicality according to gallery owners. "Collectors of miniatures are passionate about miniature art," says Smith. "They appear to be open, generous people who enjoy the detail of miniature art and are amazed by how much can be accomplished inside such a small space."

All of the pieces in Seaside's miniature art show are for sale and are priced from \$60 to \$2,000, with the majority ranging in price from \$300 to \$600. Smith says her



ple to miniature art. "Of course, the economy is a huge factor today. But people are also building more environmentally sound areas with more windows and less wall space." McCormick says he held his 2004 miniature show to accommodate the evolving needs of the market because people aren't buying huge paintings like they have in the past. "People are pulling back and scaling down," says McCormick. "Pieces of miniature art are smaller and generally less expensive—although this may not be true per square inch."

Justin Kromelow, CEO of Michael Bowen Partners, Inc., Burlingame, CA, represents San Francisco artist Michael Bowen, who he describes as "one of the most prolific artists to come out of the Beat era." Bowen has created miniature art since the 1950s and Kromelow emphasizes the portability and affordability of smaller works and the importance of the choice of framing.

"A lot of Michael's work has evolved out of his experience with travel, which forced him to work with smaller pieces," says Kromelow. "As an artist, the miniature became a vehicle to develop technique and to experiment, and because of its portable nature, it fits into his lifestyle and evolution as an artist."

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gallery's show has grown in size from about 100 to more than 500 entries this year, and that it is one of Seaside's most successful shows, with about 40 percent of the pieces being sold. Smith and her gallery got the word out by artists telling other artists, and by the gallery contacting miniature art societies for entries. Show entries range in style from realism to the very abstract. Entries include paintings, drawings, etchings, woodcuts, collage and sculptures. Entries also include pieces that do meet the specifications for traditional miniature art.

"The beauty of miniature art is that you don't need a large space for display. You can put miniature art on the walls, an easel, a desk, and I know someone who glued magnets on the back of a piece and hung it on her refrigerator," said Smith.

McCormick concurs. "Collectors who have filled up their walls still have room for a miniature—on a mantel for instance. Buying a piece of miniature art fulfills a niche in their collection."

McCormick points out other factors that attract peo-



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"A lot of people want to own original works but don't have the ability to afford larger works," says Kromelow. "These miniatures have formed a legitimate art form for people to begin their Michael Bowen collection." Bowen often uses the miniature as a vehicle to introduce a character, such as a musician, that then becomes the sub-



Works from the 2004 Winter Solstice Miniature Fun Show held at the Michael McCormick Gallery in Taos, NM, included from top to bottom, first column: "Mini Warrior," by Malcolm Furlow, acrylic on canvas, 8 x 10 inches; "Monique," by Miguel Martinez, oil pastel on paper, 6 1/2 x 7 inches; "Autumn in Yellow and Purple," by Pat Woodall, oil on canvas, 7 x 9 inches; "Ranchos Church" (bottom left), by Pat Woodall, 2 x 2 1/2 inches; and "Ava" (bottom right), by Miguel Martinez, oil pastel, 6 x 2 inches. Middle column: "Messengers," by Bill Worrell, bronze on stone, 4-inch tall images, 11-inch wide rock.



ject of a larger work that might include the musician and a jazz ensemble."

Kromelow believes that the framing is integral to the presentation of the work. "Michael uses frames as a reflection of the materials he is working with and what evolves out of that is the integration of the frame as part of the work," says Kromelow, adding that sales increased when the choice of framing was carefully integrated with the paintings as a part of the overall display.

"Our long-time collectors have integrated these miniatures into their collection," says Kromelow. "Over the years, there has been an understanding that miniature art is a legitimate form of art and a whole new medium for expression in contemporary art." Bowen's miniatures range from \$1,000 to \$2,500; canvas size is 8 x 10 inches; and the frames are about 7 inches. Bowen had a wall of miniatures in his Artexpo New York booth this year, and those were the products that sold the most according to Kromelow.

"Because of the small size, people are not intimidated," says Kromelow. "The art is approachable and perhaps more nonthreatening than a larger piece. The perceived risk factor for a large piece of work is high, while the charm of the miniature lowers those shields and the perceived risk goes down."

Peck points out that "the value of contemporary miniature art is steadily growing as the collecting public discover its amazing range." Peck adds a final comment that bridges the traditional with the contemporary view of the future of miniature art. "As long as experimentation continues to be encouraged," he says, "miniatures will progress as an art form. If the purists keep the art form static, it will not." **ABN**

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SOURCES:

- Michael Bowen Partners, Inc., 888-712-201, www.michaelbowenpartners.com
- Michael McCormick Gallery, 800-279-0879, www.mccormickgallery.com
- Marilyn Peck (artist), PeckArt@bigpond.com
- Seaside Art Gallery, 800-828-2444, www.seasideart.com
- World Federation of Miniaturists, www.worldfm.org/definitions.htm

San Francisco artist Michael Bowen had a wall of miniatures (bottom photo) at the Michael Bowen Partners booth at Artexpo New York. Top photo: Bowen's "Spirit Wanderer" (1992), oil on canvas, 8 x 10 inches. Bowen's "Traveling Man" (2002), oil on canvas, 8 x 10 inches, is shown on the cover.

