

The Day the Diorama Died

JOHN KEAN, INDEPENDENT CURATOR & WRITER



The death of the classical diorama has not been exaggerated. The medium is now technically extinct largely because the labour required to make an exquisitely resolved diorama is so expensive. Moreover, the static view of nature epitomised by the diorama's 'frozen moment' is no longer reflective of the dynamism of contemporary scientific practice nor does it acknowledge that environmental change is inevitable. Paradoxically, while it has become a lost art, the notion of the diorama has maintained its grip on the public imagination, coming to represent an imprecise and nostalgic longing for the 'old museum'.

In their heyday, dioramas created an opportunity to view an animal at close range. The stillness of a classical diorama is spellbinding. The illusions on which they were created hark back to the straight lines and vanishing points set out by Leon Battista Alberti in the Renaissance. The laws of perspective that governed dioramas went so far as to determine the exact spot for a visitor to stand so the whole scene came into harmonic view. In a period before interactive multimedia, dioramas proscribed an ideal place and time for the viewer; such was the power of the museum patriarch in the 20th century.

Many miniatures, such as those at the Australian War Memorial, use similar optical principles but require a more advanced form of suspended disbelief, as viewers must come down to the level of the miniaturised world displayed in front of them. Because natural history dioramas are generally life-sized and use real animals with real fur, they tend to engage the imagination more directly. Specialised scenic artists were adept at blending objects and foliage with the backdrop with painstaking attention to scale consistent with the rules of perspective. The finest examples of classical dioramas exhibit a miraculous fusion between two and three-dimensional elements.

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 alcoves are kept separate 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 successive windows took the visitor back through time to view past epochs. The strength of the Forest Gallery, is the visitors' journey through time, from Gondwana, to the appearance of flowering plants in Australia and onward 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 taxidermist Carl Akeley still haunts the dioramas in the American Museum of Natural History in New York. Akeley's career is marked by apocryphal stories of misadventure, including the killing of a leopard with his bare hands. When he died on expedition, his companions interred 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 change?

John Kean is an independent curator and writer.

The California Academy of Sciences: <http://www.calacademy.org>

For an article by John Kean on Museum Victoria's, McCoy Hall Dioramas go to: <http://museumvictoria.com.au/history/dioramas.html>

Above: Children looking at the Kangaroo Diorama at Museum Victoria's Swanston Street campus pre 2000. Courtesy of Museum Victoria. Photographer David Loram.

Right: Midget Library, Glasgow, David Bryce & Son, c. 1895. Rare Books Collection, State Library of Victoria (SLV). The fantastic Midget Library contains twelve volumes including the New Testament, poems, a dictionary and a tiny alphabet of birds and animals. The Library is on display in the *Mirror of the Worlds* Exhibition currently on at the SLV. Explore it at: <http://www.mirroroftheworld.com.au>

Far right: Cockington Green miniature village. Photo courtesy of Cockington Green.

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 boggling 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're irresistibly engaging.

To my mind, the main reason has to be that we who gaze on the miniature are 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 culture of the adult world, but builds confidence in controlling the apparatus of adult life. Thus, to manipulate the 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 pleasure of the power to intervene in the model universe transmutes into the joy of improving and adorning it. The doll's house (I can now see it must have been c.1900) received a total reupholstering that Christmas.

Small, Tiny, Minute: the appeal of the miniature

DR LINDA YOUNG, DEAKIN UNIVERSITY



The capacity to create is one means by which adults can maintain legitimate interaction with the toy world. Crafting miniature locomotives or furnishings is satisfyingly creative, highlighting the appealing characteristics of intricacy 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 fed by mainsprings also powered the exquisitely frivolous species of 18th-19th century miniature automata exemplified 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 veer 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 generically 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 jokey.

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 middling folk of the 18th century enabled them to adopt the 16th century aristocratic taste for miniatures, and miniature painting thrived until it was displaced by photography in the 1860s.

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 (two inches wide) of Ivory on which I work with so fine a brush, as produces little effect after much labour," which suggests the delicate insight 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 leisured 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 trees 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 joking—indicate the imaginative pleasure of unexpected scale.

Dr Linda Young is a Senior Lecturer in Museums Studies at Deakin University.

For more about Cockington Green visit:

<http://www.cockingtongreen.com.au/index.html>

For more about the *Mirror of the Worlds* Exhibition:

<http://www.slv.vic.gov.au/event/mirror-of-world>