

Masters in Miniature

IT WAS A TRUE TEST OF SKILL: TO TAKE AN ITEM OF FURNITURE, SCALE IT DOWN AND PRODUCE AN EXACT MINIATURE. THE DETAIL OFTEN INVOLVED MORE WORK THAN THE PRODUCTION OF THE ORIGINAL. BUT WHAT, EXACTLY, WAS THE REASON FOR MINIATURE FURNITURE?

JULIE CARTER INVESTIGATES.



Superb and very rare 18th century miniature Chippendale chair in mahogany, the back carved overall with leaf and floral decoration, the splat with intertwined 'C' scrolls, the seat rails with conforming decoration against a pounced background, raised on carved cabriole legs with hairy-paw feet. 26.5cm high, price approximately \$40,000.



A miniature ottoman c.1880 made for the export market. A rare and unusual serpentine fronted two drawer commode chest of drawers, beautifully veneered with mother-of-pearl in geometric designs. Syrian. 26cm high x 29cm wide x 18cm deep, price approximately \$2500.

While there seems to be no universally agreed reason for the making of miniature furniture, there have been a number of suggestions and all of them are plausible. Were they made as apprentice pieces? Or maybe they were stock examples for travelling salesmen? Perhaps they were intended for doll's houses... or they could have been commissioned as toys for adults.

Whatever the reason, miniature furniture today is very popular and not only with collectors. At the Vitra Design Museum in Germany, more than 100 miniatures dating back two centuries are used for educational purposes.

"One of our tasks as a museum is to spread the idea of design and design history, and for this the miniatures are perfect," said Joern Strueker, Head of Products at the museum. The Vitra miniatures, which

include tiny Eames and Barcelona chairs, are modern classics produced in exacting detail – just as the cabinet-makers were doing more than 200 years ago.

The idea of miniature furniture as apprentice pieces has been the most long-standing of the suggestions. It was thought that at the end of their apprenticeship, the apprentice would produce a piece in miniature to show off his skill in cabinet-making and provide an example for future employers. In France at least, however, the apprentice – who studied for six years to learn his trade and then spent a further three years under the tutelage of the master cabinet-maker – made a full-sized piece of furniture that was presented to a judge and six jurists for examination. In England, under the Statue of Artifices on 1563, an apprenticeship of seven years was mandatory in order to become a master



Above and facing page: An extremely rare 18th century miniature Dutch cylinder bureau c.1800, the architectural pediment over a pair of doors each with floral marquetry panels, opening to reveal a 'disappearing' playing card trick operated by a hidden mechanism, above a cylinder fall with marquetry panel, above three drawers again with a 'disappearing' playing card trick'. 44.5cm high x 23.5cm wide x 16.5cm deep, price approximately \$30,000.



Masters in Miniature Cont.



A lovely 19th century walnut miniature Windsor armchair on ring turned legs. 24cm high, price approximately \$600.



An early 19th century miniature mahogany chest of drawers, the veneered top above three long graduated cockbeaded drawers with turned wooden knob handles, on tall splayed bracket feet. 30.5cm high x 30cm wide x 16cm deep, price approximately \$2500.



This miniature rosewood gateleg table c.1865 features an octagonal top with a moulded edge and two hinged leaves, raised on finely turned legs with a double gate action, on turned feet. 14cm high x 18cm wide x 18.5cm deep, price approximately \$3600.

craftsman. This seems to be because, as stated: 'Until a man grows into 23 years, he for the most part, although not always wild, is without judgment and not of sufficient experience to govern himself.'

Generally it's agreed these days that if the apprentice did make any examples, they would have been for the benefit of the cabinet-maker. This is in part because candles were not allowed in the workshop, which meant the apprentice would go home in the evening, rather than stay back working on any extra items. It's also unlikely that the cabinet-maker would allow his apprentice to use his equipment to make something the apprentice was then planning to take away to display elsewhere. So if they weren't apprentice pieces, were they perhaps traveller's samples?

Although examples of miniature furniture have been found with their original carrying cases, there aren't many of them. And there were a lot of travelling salesmen. On the practical side, it would have been almost impossible to make



Walnut miniature pedestal desk, the superstructure with a central fob watch and a pair of glass inkwells above a long drawer and two short drawers in each pedestal, on a moulded plinth base and bun feet. 26cm high x 23cm wide x 13cm deep, price approximately \$3800.

something for each different example – the salesman would have been weighed down with carrying cases. But the most compelling reason to dismiss the traveller's samples suggestion is that by the end of the 18th century, many designers and cabinet-makers had produced their own design books. These would have been a lot easier to transport across the countryside than cases of miniature furniture.

The suggestion of the miniatures being made as toys for adults has more legs. The Dutch excelled at making miniature furniture as trinkets in the late 17th century, and in the 18th century the craze spread to England and the United States. "It's easy to see why a small chest of drawers would be made," notes UK dealer and miniature furniture specialist Richard Gardner, "as it would be possible to display on a larger example or a dressing table, trinkets, gloves, ribbons etc. This would probably account for the large number of chests of drawers made."

Whilst the Dutch displayed their miniatures in cabinets, the English decided to go a few steps further and created entire miniature houses, called 'Baby Houses'. In the 18th century adults used these to display



A William IV miniature mahogany chiffonier c.1835, the superstructure with a shaped back above a shelf supported by two turned columns, the base veneered overall in finely figured flame mahogany with a shaped frieze drawer, above a pair of arched panelled doors flanked by turned split columns, raised on turned feet. 43cm high x 32cm wide x 15cm deep, price approximately \$4250.



A 19th century miniature mahogany extending dining table, the top with a double moulded edge and with four additional leaves being inserted on a tongued carriage, raised on lobed, turned and fluted legs with brass ball feet. 14.5cm high x 52cm wide x 21.5cm deep, price approximately \$6650.

not only miniature furniture, but also tiny porcelain, silver, pewter and glass items. By the end of the century the Baby Houses had become dolls' houses and had been moved into the nursery for the amusement of children. Furniture was made by toy makers and cabinet-makers until around 1840, when it became a more commercialized business with the majority of doll's house items being produced in Germany. Because doll's house furniture was made to be played with rather than just admired, it's often constructed with strength and utility in mind as opposed to perfect proportions.

But the most logical reason for the existence of perfectly proportioned and detailed miniature furniture is, says Richard Gardner, as cabinet-maker pieces. "Certainly in the early 18th century and again in the 19th century, many cabinet-makers would work from a workshop, perhaps with a small window area on to the road, or a small area inside the workshop, where they would be able to display examples of their skill," he

says, "and it would be natural that these pieces would be made in miniature so as to show many different items. In the major cities it would have been normal for the customer to visit the workshop to discuss their requirements, whilst in the country it was more likely the cabinet-maker would visit the customer on their own property, loading up the horse and cart with examples of his work and the latest designs to take with him."

And there's yet another, quite intriguing possibility. In the UK, town parades were regularly held to celebrate various occasions. A miniature piece of furniture enabled a cabinet-maker to carry an example that showed off his skills. Does this sound too far-fetched? There is evidence... "This reason had never occurred to us," notes Gardner, "and it only came to light when we found a small chest of drawers that was inscribed to say it had been made by the cabinet-maker to carry in his town's parade to celebrate the Diamond Jubilee of King George III in 1809. This would explain why

there are so many good examples."

The detail applied to some miniature furniture is astounding. For example, a bureau might have a fallfront with complicated inlays, crossbanding between and on the drawers, locks that work, gilt brass handles and a fully fitted interior – and all this on an item that measures just 17 inches (or 44cm).

Regardless of the obvious quality (you can see from the items illustrated with this feature how talented some of the makers were), the appeal of miniature furniture must surely lie in the fact that they are tiny, perfect versions of a full sized piece... masters in miniature.

All of the gorgeous miniature furniture items are shown courtesy Richard Gardner Antiques of Eastrop House, 3 East Pallant, Chichester, West Sussex PO19 1IR England. Email: rg@richardgardnerantiques.co.uk. Tel: +44 1243 533 772. You can find out more about each piece – and view some of the best antiques you'll see anywhere in the world – at: www.richardgardnerantiques.co.uk.

Prices were converted from £ to A\$ using the exchange rate applicable on January 27, 2016. You'll need to contact Richard to confirm exact price (may vary a few dollars either side). Also check out Richard's video on miniature furniture on the Antiques TV channel of YouTube.

THE CHATEAU DE VENDEUVRE IN FRANCE HAS AN OUTSTANDING COLLECTION OF 18TH AND 19TH CENTURY MINIATURE OBJECTS THAT INCLUDES A COMMODE COVERED WITH EMBOSSED LEATHER, A WASHBASIN COMPLETE WITH TINY BOWLS AND JUGS, AND A STAIRCASE.



A rare early 19th century miniature chiffonier with a shaped back and single shelf raised on turned columns, above a simulated marble top over a pair of doors decorated to simulate pleated silk panels with gilt-brass crossed arrows, raised on gilt painted and turned wooden feet, decorated overall in black ground with gilt lines. 30.5cm high x 22cm wide x 9cm deep, price approximately \$10,700.



William IV miniature mahogany four poster bed c.1830, the fabric lined canopy with a moulded cornice above a deep frieze supported on four finely turned and reeded posts with moulded blocks and conforming turned and reeded legs and with a shaped and moulded headboard. 33cm high x 23cm wide x 31cm deep, price approximately \$10,200.



18th century miniature oak bureau c.1760 of exceptional colour and patina, the cleated fall enclosing a fitted interior of stepped mahogany drawers and shaped pigeon holes above two short and two long drawers each fitted with finely cast and original brass solid back-plate handles and released by brass locking pins, the moulded base fitted with a secret drawer opening on a spring mechanism, all raised on ogee bracket feet. 44cm high x 41cm wide x 29cm deep, price approximately \$20,700.



Superb Regency miniature pedestal sideboard c.1825 veneered in highly figured mahogany, each pedestal with a moulded caddy top hinged to open, above two dummy drawers each with turned ivory handles and inlaid escutcheons, above a bowed cupboard door with brass line inlay and rosewood crossbanding flanked with leaf carved uprights, the central bow fronted section with carved gallery back and central cut brass tablet over a bow fronted drawer, all raised on cast gilt paw feet. 31cm high x 53cm wide x 16.5cm deep, price approximately \$31,500.