

## **Putting Together Memories and Fantasies: The Phenomenon of Dolls' Houses and Women in their Second Childhood**

**Date :** January 15, 2008

*Hyun-Jung Oh, MA Material and Visual Culture, UCL*

Over the past three decades adult interest in dolls' houses has been renewed, starting in America and then spreading to Europe, especially Britain. My dissertation examined the relationship between dolls' houses and elderly women who enjoy them and what this phenomenon says about western culture. Extensive fieldwork based on observations and interviews was carried out in many places where dolls' houses were found, such as dolls' house fairs, toyshops, museums, a stately home and in particular, internet communities to keep up with the growing tendency for the Internet to be a site for this hobby. A wide range of publications, such as monthly magazines, instruction books, mail-order catalogues and the general history of dolls' houses and miniatures were analysed.

Originating in the sixteenth century mercantile region of Southern Germany, dolls' houses flourished in the Netherlands, England and America in line with the development of modern capitalism over four centuries. As well-wrought replicas give aesthetic delight, originally dolls' houses and miniatures contributed to the Cabinet of Curiosities. In the developmental era of modern capitalism, dolls' houses and miniatures played a role in satisfying emerging bourgeois desire to show off their contemporary wealth and taste in the form of the replica of real houses and households. In the Victorian period with the discovery of childhood as a category, dolls' houses were actively utilized as didactic medium for young girls as a preview to their future housewifery. The contemporary dolls' house scene is clearly divided into opposite ends of the life-cycle spectrum, that is, aimed at either at young children or at elderly women. While children's dolls'

houses are provided in a complete set made of sturdy materials with a crude structure and vivid colours, adult version of dolls' houses are an on-going project of collecting and making exquisite miniature pieces on a particular theme developed by owners' own creativity. However, if the range of dolls' houses can be extended to include simulation computer games, then teenage girls could still be said to be enjoying dolls' houses. The SIMS, arguably the world's bestselling game, can be seen as a virtual dolls' house that model human figures in their built environments, including houses, neighborhoods, and universities within sets of scenarios. The aim of Will Wright, the creator of the SIMS software was to make "a dolls' house come to life". Given the Marsall MacLuhan's famous phrase "the medium is the message", the comparison between the age groups and media of dolls' houses is well worth scholarly attention.

Stewart (1993: 68) locates a rise in the production of miniature furniture at the same time that antique furniture is being reproduced in mass and readily available form. Renewed interest in dolls' house can be seen in the growing social obsession with antiquity and heritage since the 1970s onwards. The geographer Lowenthal (1996: 5) claims such phenomenon to be a "cult of nostalgia" with heritage in Britain a reflection of "nostalgia for imperial self-esteem and other bygone benisons". The isolation of self from family and even of self from one's former selves are engendered by the modern aspects of life, such as increasing longevity, family dissolution, the loss of familiar surroundings, quickened obsolescence and a growing fear of technology (Lowenthal 1996: 6). Thus, women in their later life are likely to objectify their memory or imagination of childhood or ancestry, such that Tudor, Victorian or 1940s styles are favoured. Stewart (1993: 69) notes that the miniature is linked to nostalgic versions of childhood and history. Mrs D, 74-year-old informant said: "Victorians had so much in their houses so cluttered up. Walls were covered in pictures. So they are quite interesting. There have been a lot of changes. I don't like to do very modern ones". Mrs C, 76-year-old widow said: "Not very interested in modern houses. They don't have the lovely old things old people used to have". She added: "There is just, when you get old you want something, you're going back to childhood again, that's what it is, that's the real thing." Today's hobbyists show diverse patterns in engaging with dolls' houses as collectors, makers or players. While some wealthy people are collecting expensive miniature pieces, others are making them by employing their lifetimes' craft skills memorized in their hands. However, the underlying premise of hobbyists of different categories is the activity of putting together an idyllic residential scene comprising a number of objects. In old-fashioned objects older women feel the warmth of the past, contrary to the coldness of contemporary things. Given most elderly women start dolls' houses when they finish rearing their children and live apart from them, the warmth of home is well presented in the presence of dolls and objects conjuring up the sense of interactivity. The dolls' house is a miniaturization of domesticity. Women who have accumulated taste, skills and knowledge on homebuilding can employ their lifetime's accumulation in the miniaturization of domesticity. As children play with toy cars, toy tea sets according to their body size, some old people who are finding it increasingly difficult to deal physically with the actual sized world possibly satisfy their desire to interact a diminished artefactual world. Mrs D comments on the difference between decorating a real house and a dolls' house: "SIZE. You don't have to climb up the ladder. You can do it on the table". The love of homebuilding is injected into making the miniature house, 'something that's not very exerting'.

The fact that dolls' houses still have strong associations with children's playthings may hurt women's pride and joy in their hobby. However, there are huge difference between children' dolls' houses and grown-ups. While children's dolls' houses are made of sturdy material with crude structure and vivid colours, adult versions of dolls' houses are exquisite and fragile. Thus, the dealing with miniatures requires great attention to the objects and consequently intensive awareness of their bodily movement, as one informant says: "You have to use tweezers to pick them up, things like that. You close the door, calm down, precision is of the most important thing". This solitary patience in miniaturizing the world brings peace to fingers and thus souls become bathed in peace (Bachelard 1994: 159). This leads people to lose themselves in an intimate make-believe world offering a therapeutic refuge. Bachelard (Ibid: 161) observes the escapist attribute of the miniature noting that "To have experienced miniatures sincerely detaches me from the surrounding world, and helps me to resist the dissolution of the surrounding atmosphere". Ageing is often accompanied by the sadness of human destiny, including deaths and illnesses. So older people regain a sense of control over the world of objects which are manipulatable and protected from inexorable human destiny. In general terms this research highlights the neglect of the material culture of the elderly, despite their becoming an increasingly important segment of the population.

### *References*

Bachelard, G. (1994), *The Poetics of Space*, Boston: Beacon Press.

Lowenthal, D. (1996), *The Heritage Crusade*, London: Viking.

Stewart, S. (1993), *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.