



SMALL WONDERS

What's the fascination of these tiny houses? For many, the art of miniatures is a window into history, a way to capture a time and place in precise and accurate detail. For others, it's a creative outlet, crafting rooms and details that create an illusion of being in a certain place and time. Still others see miniatures as educational, an opportunity to study history, recreate a scene, or explore their craft.

JoEllen Kerwin, profiled here, is a skilled miniaturist whose work serves both artistic and historical purposes. Each of her homes create a sense of place for those who visit her tiny worlds.

JoEllen shares details of her Tudor-style home, which she built envisioning it located in the French countryside.

the artist



It's a beautiful day for a tiny home tour, and JoEllen Kerwin, an artist and miniaturist, has things ready to go.

Light fills the living room where she's set up three of her "builds," as her son Brian calls the scenes in miniature that JoEllen creates, a new medium for this former painter. Each display is set up with enough space to walk around it, offering a 360-degree view inside. In the adjacent sun room, two more miniatures sit on shelves, inviting visitors to peer at the carefully crafted details inside.

"What I like most about working with miniatures is that you're creating an illusion," JoEllen says, walking over to the largest display, a multi-room build that, unlike the other pieces, opens at the top. The room, a Japanese atelier, was purchased as a kit and finished about a year ago. It was her first multi-room project and involved hours of historical research, which JoEllen truly enjoys.

"The more realistic in scale you can get, and the more realistic the details are, the better it's going to be," she says. "People want to feel like it's real, and that illusion is what miniaturists bring."

Looking closely at her work, the illusion seems more than real.



For a tudor home, JoEllen used golf weights and polymer on plastic to mimic the look of a leaded glass window. Tiny handmade carrots and loaves of bread fill a basket outside the working front door.

"She's a kimono designer and this is her work and living space, where she meets with her customers," JoEllen says, peering inside the Japanese atelier. "I did lots of research on Japan and Japanese structures, and I discovered that in Japan they use these traditional design elements even now, so



A colorful kimono on a miniature dress form decorates a corner of a Japanese studio.

this space would be appropriate today and historically."

"I don't normally design to tell a story, but I do like to get a sense of who would be living in the space, is it true to the time and the design, is what I'm making a good space."

The atelier features a shrine, tea room and garden house (complete with a koi pond and surrounded by irises, which JoEllen learned to craft in a miniatures class). Inside, elements include a tiny kimono on a mini dress form, a sewing machine with spools of thread, and furniture including a dresser with drawers that open.

To save on costs (each room within the building shell also comes as a kit) JoEllen researched other materials she could use to duplicate the actual kit supplies.

Take the tatami mats, for example. Rather than use authentic tatami, JoEllen visited a local Vogue Fabrics store and found material that's almost an exact match in texture and color. The overhead light in the main room is actually made from a ping pong ball that JoEllen covered with thread. And she hand-painted the floor, wall and garden surfaces to create a warm room filled with fascinating detail.

She applies the same research and art skills to all of her projects. For the French House, she used polymer clay to form carrots and bread that filled a basket. She made the cobblestones from wall paste and window frames from a golf weight that she cut to fit. Deciding that she wanted to add lights, JoEllen built a lean-to to hold the light battery, then added texture and color to age the shingles and stone.

"That's where my art background helps," she says.

Each of her projects showcases a particular skill she learned from a class, or a new solution she brainstormed to get the effect she's looking for.

For the Tudor Facade, she studied Tudor homes in her neighborhood when she walked her dog, Lexi. She then researched Tudor windows to get an idea of what was required, and cut roof tiles from paper that she water-colored. A tree on the outside is actually a rosemary twig and egg cartons added texture to clay she used for the walkway.

All of these elements add to the effect, JoEllen says.

"The rooms represent a piece of the world," she says. "You see the whole thing in snippets, a view of the front, of the back and then you can see the whole house, the complete view."

JoEllen holds a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in art history from Northwestern University and a master's in art education from the University of Wisconsin. She's worked as a painter, recycled materials manager for the Chicago Children's Museum, and recently retired as an art teacher.

Her miniatures obsession began 10 years ago when she first attended the Chicago International Miniature Show, the largest gathering of dealers, artists and miniaturist fans in the world. This first visit was prompted by a flood in her mother's basement, and the Barbie collection that her mother gave her when she cleaned it up.

"I went through a period when I relived the whole doll thing," JoEllen says. "I never wanted a dollhouse, or a huge display of holiday houses and scenes, but I became



Everyday items find new life as miniatures, like this ping pong ball turned overhead light.

interested in Re-Ment, which are Barbie-sized toys and accessories. They were so much fun to open, especially the kitchens. They're the best."

(For those unfamiliar, Re-Ment is a Japanese toy manufacturer that specializes in miniature food, furniture and toys, among other collectibles. Most of their products are aimed at the adult collectible market.)

The Chicago International Miniature Show also showcases modern computer technology that has jump-started work in miniatures. Workshops on using laser cutters, 3D printing and LED lighting attract as many artisans as the more traditional skills of mold-making, crafting flowers and animals, designing stained glass, and fine needlepoint and embroidery.



JoEllen's dog Lexi makes her debut in miniature in a cozy kitchen scene.

After five years of “just going,” to the show, JoEllen figured out where her interests lie.

“In the beginning I worked with different elements to get an idea of what I liked,” JoEllen says. “So much of what they have on display and for sale, I just thought ‘oh, that’s too sweet’. But the artisans who made the tile and the furniture, and painted the surfaces? That’s what I was really interested in. It turns out I like the challenge of structures.”

She began to buy room kits as a way to test the waters, and she joined a local miniatures club. She participated in some of the projects, but soon realized that what she enjoyed most was the people.

“Miniaturists are very sharing, very willing to help you with ideas and solutions, and

when you have people to share the work with, it strengthens what you do,” Jo Ellen says. “I love the creative challenge, and I like talking to people about it. I’ve done that all my life.”

Working with miniatures also offered JoEllen a welcome creative challenge from painting.

“After filling two houses with paintings, I was ready for something new. I sometimes found painting to be isolating, but this community is so big and so giving, it’s a nice change of pace.”

JoEllen’s latest project explores the Art Nouveau movement in a room that she’s building from scratch.



Details from landscaping that JoEllen placed outside a house; treats that look almost good enough to eat.



“The idea came from a class on art nouveau furniture I took with a fascinating artist from Amsterdam,” she says. “I picked the class because I love that period, and I started to learn more about it. Then I bought a piece of wallpaper and thought, what will I make from this? I decided to make a room box, and here we are.”

Her workshop in an upstairs bedroom is filled with computer printouts, stencils and tackle boxes filled with buttons, earrings, beads and other knick knacks that somehow she finds uses for. She’s designed and made tiny breads, flowers and even crown molding from her mother’s costume jewelry and her grandmother’s buttons. She even uses a pasta maker to mix and form the polymer clay she uses, which she then bakes in a toaster oven.

“You get very inspired with these things,” JoEllen says. “Miniaturists are definitely hoarders. It’s a nice challenge to me to figure this out.”

The combination of historical research and creativity clearly inspires her work.

“I fantasize about living in the Swiss mountains and doing this all the time,” JoEllen says, holding up the art nouveau molding she created that’s drying on the table.

“I love the creative challenge. It’s not a job at all, it’s almost a need. I feel so much better when I work on this. I just feel calmer, and happier.” 