

Not Suitable for Children



William and Mary House parlor. The current owners have furnished the parlor as a New England room of the William and Mary period. A painted high chest centers the wall, and in front of it is an oak gate-legged table with two banister back chairs. On it are Dutch or English glass vessels and a silver punch bowl. In one corner is a chest over drawers with a "wag-on-the-wall" lantern clock hanging above it. Two Chinese porcelain stools are on the floor. The room is lit by a silver chandelier. *Courtesy photo.*

Early Dollhouses in an exhibit at the Concord Museum

John Fiske

Dollhouses were not child's play: Not by a long chalk. In sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England and Europe they were expensive items made for adults, both for pleasure and purpose. Long before that, around 4,000 years before, they were religious. Ancient Egyptians were buried with wooden miniatures of servants, furnishings, boats and pets, probably to ensure their comfort in the afterlife and to serve as an offering to the Gods.

History of dollhouses

The early European dollhouses, however, were thoroughly secular. They began in Germany and Holland in the sixteenth century where they were often miniature versions of the houses of the wealthy families

who commissioned them. They were made with consummate skill by the best craftsmen of the day. Their main function, it appears, was to provide a "show and tell" session for guests, and to provide householders with something to look at and admire. The more exact the detail, the better the dollhouse served its purpose. The miniature version of the real house owned by the daughter of the Prince of Bavaria, to give an example, contained miniature bottles with real wine in its tiny cellars – true objects of wonder.

As objects of wonder, dollhouses were an important part of the visual culture of the time. Almost all the books that were available were instructional (in England, the first novel – a book to be read mainly for



William and Mary doll and furniture.

Doll attributed to William Higgs, England, c. 1685. Painted wood; silk and other materials. Private Collection. *Photo by Gavin Ashworth.*

"Lady Elizabeth" lived with the same Amsterdam family for generations. Lady Elizabeth has similar carving and paintwork seen on the dolls (approximately 23 known) created in the late 17th century by an English master doll maker, William Higgs.

Chest of Drawers: England, c. 1690. Walnut and walnut veneer with turned "bun" feet. Private collection.

Armchair: England, late 17th century. Carved walnut. Private collection.

Cluster Column Candlesticks: Michael Maenbeck, Haarlem (the Netherlands), 1685. Private collection.

Pair of Double-Gourd Delft Vases: Factory of De Witte Starre, the Netherlands, c. 1690.

Private collection.

Miniature Toilet Service: Silver, the Netherlands, c. 1695. Private collection.

Late Seventeenth-Century Dollhouse



Silver in William and Mary House. Miniature Silver. Private collection. There was a particular vogue for miniature silver in early 18th-century England and the Netherlands that was satisfied by specialized silver workers known as toy makers. *Photo by Gavin Ashworth.*



William and Mary House, England, 1680-1700. Oak. Private collection. The earliest dollhouses weren't properly houses at all but elaborate cabinets with shelves meant for the display of miniatures arranged in room settings. This house, made of oak as the earliest English examples tend to be, has fireplaces in the corners of the "rooms," reflecting the influence of Dutch domestic architecture on early English dollhouses. On the outside, the quoins (projecting blocks) on the corners are an architectural feature, but that's about as far as this cupboard goes in that direction; only later would "baby houses" come to be made in the form of actual houses. Very few English examples of this early date are known. *Courtesy photo.*



William and Mary House bedchamber. The bed hangings and covers are made of 17th-century fabrics as is the clothing of the doll. The oyster veneer and marquetry chest of drawers on the back wall is English, as is the japanned high chest beside it. The smaller marquetry chest of drawers on the right is probably English, but may be Dutch. Note that even the bed warmer is silver, and that there are two styles of candlesticks, a spiral twist one from the 1680s, and a ring and baluster model that is a generation later. All the silver is 17th- and 18th-century Dutch and English. The large water jugs are for washing and the glass bottle and glasses are for drinking. *Courtesy photo.*

pleasure - was published in 1688). Before then, people loved looking at things that told stories – the cabinet of curiosities was a favorite, but people often spent evenings poring over maps of exotic places, and, coming closer to home, over dollhouses.

The fully furnished dollhouse was a visual sign of the wealth and status of the owner. Guests and family alike could lose themselves in admiring the miniaturized interior décor, the carving around the mantels and doors, and of course, the furniture – all of which were typically miniaturizations of the full-sized house in which they were standing. The wealth of the owner was made visible not just in the full sized rooms and furniture, but

also in the miniatures themselves: A fully furnished dollhouse could cost almost as much as the real house itself.

In eighteenth-century England some dollhouses, called "baby houses," replicated the architecture of the real house. Indeed, the architect who designed the house often designed the baby house to go inside it. Baby houses were still primarily for adults, but they were often given to girls when they were married, perhaps as a memento of the household they was leaving, and perhaps as a clear symbol for their new family of the family estate from which they came. The Dutch, too, often gave *poppenhuizen* (dollhouses) as marriage gifts to their daughters.

Tools for teaching

Dollhouses were also educational. By careful observation of the various interior rooms and the manner in which they were furnished, both boys and girls could educate themselves about how a household should be set up and managed. The didactic function was sometimes even more explicit. What came to be known as "Nuremberg kitchens" were all-metal houses, purely functional with minimal ornamentation, whose sole use was as a teaching aid for mothers to show their daughters how to manage a household and its servants. A Nuremberg kitchen was where a young girl was trained to become the lady of the house. We can be pretty confident, too, that

the more elaborate "adult" houses were used for similar educational purposes.

In *Dollhouse History 101: the First Dollhouses in Europe*, Danielle LeBrun tells of a Nuremberg woman called Anna Köferlein who, in 1631, assembled a dollhouse for public display and distributed pamphlets extolling its virtues for teaching children household management. Though her house is lost, the pamphlet remains and depicts a very grand house with leaded pane windows.

Change comes

The industrial revolution was to revolutionize dollhouses, just as it did with other previously artisan-made objects. And alongside the



Queen Anne doll and furniture.

Doll, England, c. 1740. Wood, silk; other materials. Private collection.

Although dolls like this one are referred to stylistically as Queen Anne, this one actually dates to the reign of George II. "Lady Anne," as the doll is known, still in her original dress, was stored in the cupboard of an English country house for generations. She was treasured and owned by the same family since she was made, the family having lived on the same estate since 1620. Photo by Gavin Ashworth.

Armchair: England, c. 1720. Walnut. Private collection.

Kneehole Desk: England, c. 1740. Inlaid mahogany. Private collection.

Punch Bowl: The Netherlands, dated 1742. Tin-glazed earthenware. Private collection.

Candlesnuffer in Stand: The Netherlands, c. 1710. Silver. Private collection.

Books: 17th- and 18th-century miniature leather bound books. Private collection.

Repousse Candlestick: England or the Netherlands, c. 1700. Silver. Private collection.

changed methods of production, the sense of childhood underwent a profound change as well. Until the early nineteenth century, English and European children were seen as adults-in-the-making. Their young years were spent in developing the abilities needed in an adult. The idea that childhood should be enjoyed for its own sake, free from the constraints of being an adult, is an early nineteenth-century concept that brought with it the new notion of play as a free and natural activity of childhood.

When the idea of play as a valuable activity in its own right met the industrial ability to mass produce dollhouses, then, obviously, the dollhouse suddenly became an object of childhood – its adult purview disappeared completely, and its educational function took second place to playtime. The dollhouse became a toy.

At first, most toy dollhouses were produced in Germany and were exported to America and Britain. WWI, however, put a stop to that, and American companies began manufacturing dollhouses. One of the first was the TynieToy Company of Providence, R.I., that made replicas of American antique houses and furniture beginning in about 1917. Other early twentieth-century American manufacturers included TootsieToy, Roger Williams Toys, Schoenhut and the Wisconsin Toy Co.

Dollhouses are still handmade by parents, grandparents and uncles for their beloved girls, they can still be semi-handmade from kits of parts, or they can be bought mass produced from the toy store. They may still enable girls to play at being an adult woman, but their origin as adult emblems of wealth and objects of wonder has disappeared into the mists of time. But the origins of dollhouses are an important part of the exhibition currently on show at the Concord Museum in Concord, N.H.: The exhibit *The Art and Mystery of the Dollhouse* spans the full range of dollhouses from about 1695 to the present day.

The exhibit

The Art and Mystery of the Dollhouse, curated by David Wood, is on display in Concord Museum until Jan. 15, 2017. Highlights include a rare dollhouse from 1695; "room dollhouses" by one-time Concord resident Ruth Rosenfeld; and a large Hape Dollhouse with which visitors can play. There is even a celebrity doll - Melissa Shakespeare, the beloved doll of children's book illustrator Tasha Tudor. Melissa's doll wedding was featured in Life magazine.

Concord Museum, 200 Lexington Road, Concord, MA 01742, 978-369-9763, cm1@concordmuseum.org

April–Dec.: Mon–Sat 9 a.m.–5 p.m., Sun 12–5 p.m. **Jan.–March:** Mon–Sat 11 a.m.–4 p.m., Sun 1–4 p.m.



The kitchen of the Camden House, England, dated 1838. Private collection.

This house includes all its original furnishings, including a copy of T. Goode's miniature edition of *The History of England* (1837). Camden, now part of London proper, was in 1838 a suburb with housing developed for working people. The Cratchet family of Charles Dickens' *Christmas Carol* (1843) lived in Camden. This dollhouse first came to America in 1964. Photo by Gavin Ashworth.

The Georgian Period



Looking through a window in the Georgian House, England, 1720-1730. Private collection. This oak dollhouse on stand is in the form of an early Georgian country house. When it was owned by pioneering dollhouse collector Vivien Greene, the house included a clockwork ghost. The ghost intrigued the young Prince Charles when he saw the house in the first (1955) major exhibition on the subject of early dollhouses, but the show organizers were unable to get the ghost to perform for him. *Photo by Gavin Ashworth.*



Georgian dolls and furniture. *Photo by Gavin Ashworth.*
The Dolls: England, c. 1780. Wood; silk; other materials. Private collection.
Chest on Chest: England, c. 1735. Mahogany inlaid with satinwood. Private collection.

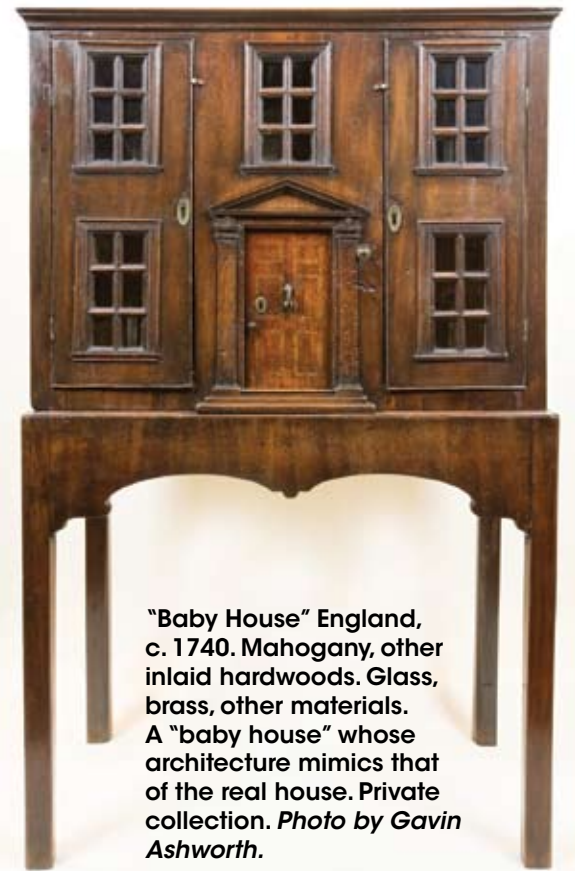


Library of the Georgian House, England, 1720-1730. Private collection.

The silver candlestand, chocolate pot, cups, tray, pipe rack and fireplace accessories are all early 18th century, some of them the work of Dutch toy makers and some of them English. The slant-lid desk and tripod table with the piecrust top are English and 18th-century, as is the terrestrial globe, which dates to the 1770s. The silk-covered and carved side chairs are Dutch and date to c. 1680. In addition to the silver candlestand, there is an 18th-century iron candlestand. The brass repoussé candle sconces are 17th- and 18th-century. The miniature porcelain vases are Chinese and date to the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries. *Courtesy photo.*



Southwestern room, c. 1970-2000, by Ruth Rosenfeld, of Concord, Mass. In the collection of the Strong National Museum of Play, Rochester, N.Y.
 Ruth Frey Rosenfeld (1926-2008) effortlessly combined a love for the wider world, satisfied by extensive travel, with an extraordinary talent for recreating it in miniature. It is the sort of paradox that in the world of dollhouses is a matter of course.
 Born in Rochester, N.Y., Ruth Rosenfeld lived much of her life here in Concord. For 30 years she collected miniatures and assembled them into dollhouses and miniature rooms, more than 60 of which her family gave to The Strong National Museum of Play.
 The tiny scale gave Rosenfeld the freedom to roam freely across the globe and through time, resulting in rooms that imagine a variety of locations, cultures and eras, including a New England sitting room decorated for the holidays, an Early American parlor, a Shaker bedroom and a Southwestern home. *Photo by the Strong National Museum of Play.*



"Baby House" England, c. 1740. Mahogany, other inlaid hardwoods. Glass, brass, other materials.
 A "baby house" whose architecture mimics that of the real house. Private collection. *Photo by Gavin Ashworth.*



Green and red dollhouse.
 Place of origin unknown; maker unknown. Early 20th century. In the collection of the Strong National Museum of Play, Rochester, N.Y. *Photo by the Strong National Museum of Play.*

"Melissa Shakespeare."
 Attributed to the Jumeau Company, France, c. 1885. Bisque porcelain, glass eyes, kidskin body, silk dress.
 Collection of Marjorie Tudor, Tasha Tudor and Family, Inc. *Photo by Gavin Ashworth.*
 For a doll, Melissa Shakespeare has led a very complicated life. Originally the doll of Tasha Tudor's aunt Edith, Melissa was first featured in a book in 1950. She became famous under an alias, Annabelle, in 1954. International fame arrived in 1955, when Melissa Shakespeare's marriage to Captain Thaddeus Crane, a doll Tasha Tudor made, was covered by *Life* magazine in a four-page spread with 11 photographs. Twenty years later, a new doll, Emma Birdwhistle, entered Captain Crane's life, and he and Melissa parted ways. "Emma came along, and there was some trouble," said Tasha Tudor.

