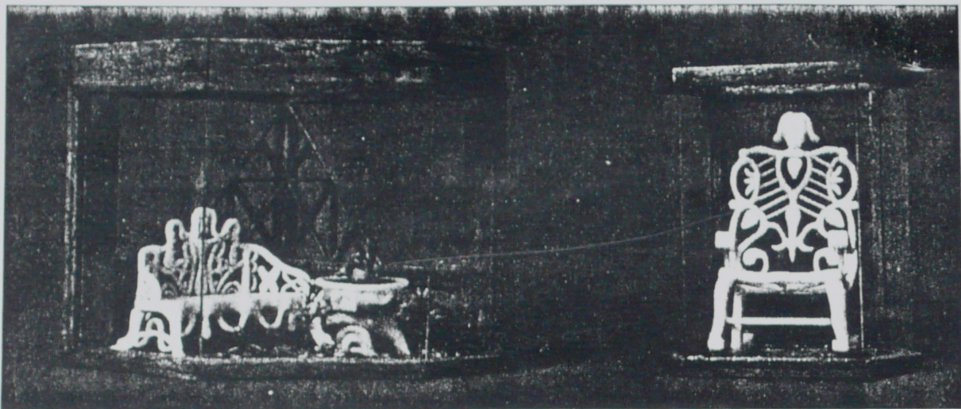
They Have Jobs on the Slide: Microscopic Art

Miniaturists Can Conceive Intricate Worlds on The Head of a Pin

By Lynn Ermann
Special to The Washington Post



Using a needle, Michael Harms whittles diminutive chairs out of soap (top). Raymond Materson's works "Opening Day" (left) and "Almost Free . . . at Last" are tiny tapestries. All the works are less than 3 inches tall.

One sneeze would obliterate Harris Ha's entire art collection. His Mona Lisa is smaller than a grain of rice. "It could fit inside the O on your keyboard," says Ha, a Millbrae, Calif., investor. He also owns an engraving of a Chinese poem on a single strand of human hair, the U.S. Constitution written on paper the size of a postage stamp, and more than a hundred other pint-size pieces.

This may be the age of the colossal canvas, but some collectors, curators and artists—albeit on the fringe—are choosing a more diminutive scale. Raymond Materson weaves tiny tapestries, so detailed that they are best viewed under a magnifying glass. New Yorker Charles LeDray carved a wee ladder and bed out of human femur. Enrique Ramos Angelos of Mexico has created countless one-of-a-kind miniatures, including a varnished housefly painted with portraits of Jesus and the Apostles. Michael Drummond whittles the likenesses of sports figures into toothpicks. And Maria-Fernanda Cardoso leads a traveling circus—of fleas.

Two current U.S. museum exhibits focus exclusively on miniatures: "At the Threshold of the Visible," a two-year traveling exhibit (nowhere near Washington), offers a sampling of small-scale work by notable modern artists like LeDray and Elizabeth LeMoine. The M.H. de Young Museum in San Francisco is displaying the microminiature needle sculptures of the late Hagop Sandaldjian—you have to view them under a microscope. Some galleries, like Baltimore's American Visionary Art Museum, also include miniature works in their regular exhibits, and a handful of amateur miniaturist associations hold annual shows. The kookier minis can be found at Ripley's Believe It or Not! museums.

There is no single tradition of miniature art but rather many disparate ones. Briefly, some of the earliest miniature paintings might be considered the religious illuminated manuscripts that were painted during the Middle Ages, according to "The Eye of the Needle," Ralph Rugoff's essay for the Sandaldjian exhibit. In the 15th and 16th centuries, both portrait miniatures and tiny carvings on wood and fruit pits came into vogue.

Microminiatures have a shorter history, according to Rugoff, because they are linked to the invention of the microscope. (Otherwise, any charlatan could claim to have micro-engraved the Book of Psalms on his toenail: Who would know?) This kind of work has a Barnumesque tradition (like the Lord's Prayer written on the head of a pin), as well as an unusual presidential one.

Richard Nixon, John F. Kennedy and Teddy Roosevelt were given portraits painted on grains of rice. Forty years ago Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev gave a grain of rice engraved with the text of a political agreement to the king of Afghanistan. The work was created by an Armenian, Edward Ter-Ghazarian, who at 76 is the elder statesman of miniaturists. Jin Yinhua of New York recently painted President Clinton on a hair and hopes to give him the portrait. He uses, needless to say, an extremely small brush and a knife tinier than the point of a pin, and works under a microscope.

However diverse, miniature art often shares one characteristic: It is born of necessity. The artists "are generally in confined spaces with a lot of time on their hands, which lends itself to compulsion and painstaking detail," says Frank Maresca, co-owner of Ricco Maresca gallery in New York.

Raymond Materson, 44, first embroidered his tiny tapestries while in prison in Connecticut for armed robbery and kidnapping. He was watching television in his tiny cell when a commercial for the Rose Bowl came on. He decided to make himself a Wolverines hat, so he sewed himself an "M" (for Michigan) patch out of unraveled socks. Soon other prisoners started bringing Materson their socks, asking him to make patches for them. Over time, Materson moved on to other themes—Shakespeare, music—and his works became tinier and more detailed. The small scale of his work was necessary: "I kind of had to hide stuff from the guards," he says.

Michael Harms, in prison in Canton, Ill., for murder, whiles away the time carving tiny chairs out of soap with a needle. Other artisans are retirees like Paul Edlin, a New Yorker who cuts stamps into tiny pieces and makes them into mosaics. Hobbyist Mike Drummond of Florida works for NASA by day and is a devoted toothpick carver by night.

Miniaturists work with the most improbably tiny tools, straining their eyes and every muscle. "You have to have good eyesight and very steady hands," says Drummond, 46.

Californian He Hong Jiang, 35, who produces artworks for collector Ha, works small pieces of ivory without a microscope and between heartbeats and breaths. "If he breathes, his hand has to stop and he has difficulty finding his place again," Ha says. Needle artisan Sandaldjian used tiny ground-up gems and single-strand paint brushes for tools, working only at night, when "static-bearing dust particles had settled." So many things can go wrong: Ter-Ghazarian, Sandaldjian's teacher in Armenia, once inhaled 10 of the 15 tiny gold dancing girls that he was working on. Miniaturists often pay another price for their precision: crippling carpal tunnel syndrome, sight loss and back problems.

Fame is rarely the motivating factor: "Miniaturists generally work in obscurity," says David Wilson, director of the eccentric Museum of Jurassic Technology in Los Angeles, which arranged the Sandaldjian show. Selling the work is difficult, but there are some successes: Materson's work now fetches between $2,500 and $5,000. (He has continued to sell his art in the years since being released from prison and is now working on a book about his art and life.) Bat, snake and fly painter Ramos has sold more than 100 pieces to Ripley's, for prices ranging from $125 to $1,000, and claims to have sold work for as much as $10,000. Jin, 43, says he once sold a hair painting for $100,000 to the king of Brunei.

Not all miniaturists find such success. Ter-Ghazarian continues to have a following in Armenia, but sales in the United States are tough. His friend Avo Jerejian has had little luck selling five of the microminiaturist's needles in the United States, partly because he can't get them appraised. The works include a caravan of camels passing through the eye of a needle, disproving the old proverb.

Edward T. Meyer, vice president for publishing at Ripley's Believe It or Not! world headquarters, says that miniatures went out of vogue because so many of them are machine-made. "Shopping malls have rice writing for $12.95 now," he says. Nanotechnology can produce just about anything on a microscopic scale; one graduate student recently created a nano-guitar.

Most art collectors view miniatures as on the fringe, involving a kind of showmanship that seems antithetical to what we think of as art. Artists, even those who do a lot of very small-scale work, often don't want it categorized this way.

"I would not say that I make miniatures; I think miniature implies trying to copy something and making it tiny," says LeDray, 38, an artist who has made several tiny works out of bone but who has also done larger work.

Yet visitors to the recent Outsider Art Fair in New York were hardly concerned with semantics as they crowded in front of Materson's jewel-like tapestries. "It's amazing," said one, not wanting to yield the magnifying glass to the next person. Art like this is both intimate and inexplicably wondrous.