



Temple of imagination

Carmel artist Suzanne Landshof has built a world of her own creation at the Museum of Miniature Houses

By Adam Aasen · adam@youarecurrent.com

An outfitted French maid readies the shiny wood dining room table, arranging roast beef, wine bottles, desserts and a sterling centerpiece. A Labrador retriever lies underneath the table on a decorative rug.

And this is all less than a few inches tall. We're not talking about doll houses. This is far more detailed than that. Welcome to the world of miniatures, a passion that local artist Suzanne Landshof has been dedicated to for more than 30 years.

"Every piece has its own story," she said. "And so many people contribute to each display."

Big planning went into these tiny rooms. Nothing is an afterthought. The china plates are made of real clay, fired and expertly painted. The dog has real canine hair. Upholsterers create couches. Blacksmiths forge intricate metal tools - like silver spoons the size of a fingernail.

Electrical work. Carpentry. Interior decorating. Anything that goes into decorating your actual house is done by artists featured at the Museum of Miniature Houses - just on a one-inch scale.

Combining art forms

Growing up in the Northeast, Landshof always had an appreciation for the arts. She loved all creative outlets from woodworking to architecture to interior design. Working with miniatures gave her a chance to combine all of her passions into one artform.

While living in Kansas City, she volunteered for the Kansas City Toy & Miniature Museum. A few years after moving to Indianapolis, she founded the Museum of Miniature Houses and Other Collections in 1991 with partners Suzie Moffett and Nancy Lesh.

The not-for-profit museum operates with only one part-time employee, and the rest of the work is handled by many passionate volunteers. And Landshof has many of her own works



Suzanne Landshof creates miniature worlds using scenes cut from her own imagination. (Photos by Adam Aasen)

displayed at the museum.

A million little pieces

Every miniaturist has a specialty. Very few create every single object in a miniature house. It's just not practical to do everything, including forging metals, shaping clay and painting tapestries.

Friends say Landshof is an expert at selecting and arranging items in a room to make it tell a story. She matches furniture and clothes to fit a time period and a personality. She dreams up a tale for the fictional people who live in the miniature houses in order to find the items that make

up their lives.

She attends conventions across the nation and scours websites to find just the right piece to decorate a room. It can take years.

Some items, such as a painted vase, can cost up to \$200 from the world's top artists.

Sometimes you have to break down and custom order an item, such as a doll she had made of a masked burglar on the roof of a house.

Other times you try to make it yourself.

Landshof is skilled at making furniture and working with wood. Her husband, Tom, will do all of the electrical work on her projects, wiring working lights in the homes. He'll bring home

beautiful wood boxes from his work at the Grapevine Cottage, and she'll turn them into new rooms. He gets almost as excited about her projects as she does.

"I recommend it as a great hobby for couples," she said. "What one person might not like to do, the other person might like."

Museum for everyone

It's an interesting mix of visitors that check out the museum. Some wander in off the street expecting "doll houses," a term that miniature experts tend not to use because it implies that their art is a toy to be played with.

Other guests are miniaturists themselves and declare as they walk in, "I just want you to know, this is a destination for me," Landshof said.

Some have traveled from across the globe to see the exhibits.

Tom Landshof said he's always happy to see newcomers. Men are often skeptics, but they see the miniature scenes of Sherlock Holmes cases or military artifacts and they are impressed. Sometimes you mention model trains, a similar but different hobby, and it clicks in their minds for them.

"It's funny because you see a lot of husbands who are dragged there by their wives, and by the end of the day they are the ones who don't want to leave," Tom said.

Although they are a small museum, they have a loyal following.

Suzanne Landshof recalls an afternoon during one of the first bad snowfalls this year. The roads were rough and the parking lots weren't cleared. The museum was closed, but she stopped by to get something and she found visitors waiting at the door. A young man told them he drove through the slippery road conditions because it was his girlfriend's birthday and this was one of her favorite places to go. She opened up for them, and they stayed for more than two hours, revisiting the museum they had seen before.

"It really is a neat place for families and couples to visit together," she said. "Just the other day, I saw three generations visit the museum together, and as they left the young boy shouts out, 'I love this place' and it makes you feel good to be a part of that."