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Life in Miniature Exhibition at the Kelsey Museum of Archaeology: Intertwining Theoretical and Traditional Approaches in the Exhibition of Terracotta Figurines and Other Miniature Objects

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REFERENCES

Stephanie M. Langin-Hooper, *Life in Miniature Exhibition at the Kelsey Museum of Archaeology: Intertwining Theoretical and Traditional Approaches in the Exhibition of Terracotta Figurines and Other Miniature Objects*, Kelsey Museum of Archaeology, University of Michigan, 2014

- 1 The exhibition, which was open to the public from December 2013 through April 2014, presented tiny artifacts from Seleucia-on-the-Tigris (in modern Iraq) dating between 300 B.C.E. and 200 C.E. Of special interest to museum visitors was that the *Life in Miniature* exhibition was the first public display of most of these objects since their excavation in Iraq in the 1930s. The majority of the objects in the exhibition were terracotta figurines, making this one of the largest special exhibitions of Hellenistic Babylonian terracottas in recent years. As specialists in coroplastic studies are well aware, miniature objects (including terracotta figurines) are often found in massive quantities in the archaeological record—an overwhelming, and ironic, largesse of tiny things that does not translate well to traditional museum display practices. Thus is a reality that is often lost on the museum visitor, who is usually only shown a handful of carefully curated, pristine examples, unaware that hundreds (if not thousands) more such objects exist. The *Life in Miniature* exhibition inverted this display trend, and presented over 700 miniature objects, not all of them pristine or unbroken, to demonstrate that such tiny things were an integral and ubiquitous part of ancient life (fig. 1).

Figure 1: View of terracotta figurine displays, as Exhibition Curator Stephanie Langin-Hooper gives tour.

CREDIT: CRAIG BELL, BGSU.

- 2 The initial impetus for organizing this exhibition came from the loan-to-transfer of Seleucia objects from the Toledo Museum of Art (TMA) to the Kelsey Museum in 2012. The TMA was a financial sponsor of the University of Michigan's six seasons of archaeological excavation at the site of Seleucia-on-the-Tigris in the 1920s and 1930s. In accordance with then-current archaeological conventions in the host country of Iraq, the Seleucia expedition brought a selection of artifacts back to the United States.

The Kelsey Museum received the vast majority of these objects (over 13,000), while approximately 700 of the finds were distributed to the Toledo Museum of Art. Many of those artifacts were chosen specifically for the TMA while the excavation team was still in Iraq: hand-written field labels inscribed with the word “Toledo” are still attached to a few of these ancient objects. The objects destined for the Toledo Museum of Art were selected to fit in with the TMA’s mission as a leading public art museum, rather than an archaeological museum. Thus, despite the relatively small number of Seleucia artifacts received by the TMA, most were well-preserved, high quality, and appealing to a modern aesthetic taste. However, none of the Seleucia objects were ever on display at the TMA, which eventually led to their 2012 transfer to the Kelsey Museum and the reuniting of the Seleucia-on-the-Tigris collection. The *Life in Miniature* exhibition spotlighted about 200 of these TMA pieces, with the remaining 500 objects in the exhibition coming from the Kelsey’s permanent collection.

- 3 The introductory display in the *Life in Miniature* exhibition highlighted the history of the Seleucia-on-the-Tigris excavation and the partnership between the Kelsey Museum and the Toledo Museum of Art. The rest of the exhibition alternated between presenting these miniature objects according to traditional methodologies and modes of analysis (such as type, iconography, and manufacturing technique) and more theoretical approaches to figurines that explored the role of miniaturization in conditioning the ways in which people see, interact with, and ultimately use tiny objects to express social identities. The curatorial goal in alternating traditional and theoretical approaches was to highlight the importance of both avenues of study, as well as to encourage visitors to think about miniature objects—both in the past, and in their modern lives—from a wide variety of perspectives. The “cuteness” (or, in more scholarly terms, the “enchantment”) of miniature objects was brought to the fore throughout the exhibition, not as something to be dismissed or romanticized, but rather as a key reason why miniatures were used so widely in the past and continue to be fascinating today. Armed with the portable, hand-held magnifying glasses provided at the entrance to the exhibition, visitors were encouraged to acknowledge their own experiences of “enchantment” in reaction to these miniature artifacts (fig. 2).

Figure 2: Close-up view of a terracotta “puppet” figurine, as a visitor uses a magnifying glass to inspect it.

CREDIT: CRAIG BELL, BGSU.

- 4 Wall panels and display cases in the first half of the exhibition focused on the personal aspects of interactions between people and miniatures. The first display presented the theoretical concept of “fascination with the tiny,” followed by a more traditionally-themed case that organized miniatures by the functional category of being worn on the human body (signet rings, pendants, etc.). The third display was organized by iconographic typology, presenting terracotta figurines of various animals and exploring how the ownership of miniature animals allowed a personal interaction with wild, as well as domestic, species that was not possible in real life. The fourth, and the largest, case in the exhibition displayed “interactive” miniatures, as defined by their movable, interchangeable, or separately-added components. Theoretical issues came to the fore in this display, where such miniatures were discussed as making the large-scale world “feel” more manageable by literally shrinking it to tiny proportions. While all miniatures have this capacity, interactive miniatures further accentuate these feelings of self-assurance by giving their owners the ability to manipulate and pose another human body—albeit a tiny one. The installation of objects in this display case was carefully crafted to give the visitor a sense of these figurines’ potential for movement and interactivity. This can be seen in Figure 3, an in-progress installation photograph of me positioning a horse-rider figurine over a corresponding miniature horse, as if their original owner was seen in the act of play.

Figure 3: Exhibition Curator Stephanie Langin-Hooper installing a horse-rider and horse figurines.

CREDIT: MARIAH POSTLEWAIT.

Visitors to the *Life in Miniature* exhibition were also able to experience the delight of interacting with miniatures through a series of nine digital animations, accessible on iPads in the museum gallery (fig. 4). In these animations, digital reconstructions of several of the ancient objects displayed in the exhibition moved in the same way(s) that they did for their original owners approximately 2,000 years ago. These digital animations were created in cooperation with the Digital Arts program at Bowling Green State University.

Figure 4: Visitor using iPad touch-screens to view animations of interactive figurines in motion.

CREDIT: CRAIG BELL, BGSU.

- 5 In the second half of the exhibition, focus shifted from personal interactions with miniatures to the broader questions of what these tiny objects can tell scholars about the ancient society of Seleucia-on-the-Tigris. This section began from a traditional perspective of coroplastic study: figurine manufacturing and production techniques, as well as the functionality of miniatures, were explored in the exhibition's fifth and sixth cases. The seventh case, also quite traditional in organization, presented figurines linked to supernatural beliefs; these included representations of the gods themselves, as well as other supernatural beings, worshippers, miniature "offerings," and representations of cultic buildings and furniture. Despite the traditional scope of these three displays, theoretically-driven perspectives on miniature objects were also hinted at in the corresponding text panels. For instance, in the presentation of figurines depicting the Greek god Herakles, visitors were asked to consider *why* miniature representations of deities might be appealing—and that perhaps such figurines might celebrate the god's power, and yet, conversely, also grant the ability to hold a god in one's hand, inspiring feelings of personal control over an unpredictable world.
- 6 The final two cases of ancient objects in the exhibition were the broadest in scope and among the more explicitly progressive in academic perspective. Case eight tackled the issue of cross-cultural interaction between Greeks, Babylonians, and the other diverse residents of Seleucia-on-the-Tigris in the Seleucid and Parthian periods. The issue of cross-cultural interaction is considered one of the most significant of this historical period, and most perspectives on this topic look to royal policy and other high-level evidence for insights into Hellenistic-era social organization. This display took a bottom-up approach to analyzing humble and unassuming figurines for evidence of how, and to what extent, members of this community engaged across cultural lines. It is my contention that the figurines provide evidence of substantial cross-cultural exchange, as could be seen in figurines shown in this exhibition's eight display cases (fig. 5), which present a range of Greek and Babylonian traditional styles and

manufacturing techniques. Indeed, such cross-cultural blending and “hybridity” could be observed throughout the objects in this exhibition—a reflection of the complex social world of Seleucia-on-the-Tigris. The ninth and final case of ancient objects in the exhibition explored how this social diversity means that it is difficult to even categorize the miniatures of Seleucia-on-the-Tigris into “types,” as the lines between motifs, styles, manufacturing techniques, and even object material were blurred (and, to some extent, disappeared) in the wake of the rich, cross-cultural interactions and exchange between artistic traditions that created the plethora and diversity of miniature objects on exhibit.

Figure 5: Eighth display case in the exhibition, highlighting figurine evidence for cross-cultural interaction between Greeks, Babylonians, and other cultural groups at Seleucia-on-the-Tigris.

CREDIT: MARIAH POSTLEWAIT.

- 7 Links between the ancient miniature objects of Seleucia-on-the-Tigris and our modern world were made in two installations in the *Life in Miniature* exhibition. The last display case in the show presented a selection of “modern day miniatures,” such as dolls and collectables, which were curated and displayed in the same way as the ancient objects. In placing such every-day objects behind glass, the exhibition bridged the gap between past and present, and encouraged visitors to reflect on how our own society also has a “life in miniature.” Additionally, a photographic collage installation by Mariah Postlewait, entitled *What do Miniatures Say about You?*, seen in the background of Figure 3, juxtaposed images of people holding their own, contemporary miniatures, such as Christmas ornaments, refrigerator magnets, and wedding-cake toppers, with photographs of the Kelsey Museum staff holding ancient artifacts. Through this photographic journey, visitors were invited to consider how the miniatures in their own lives and homes relate to personal and social identities today.
- 8 In addition to visiting the *Life in Miniature* exhibition, the public was also invited to attend the exhibition lecture series and associated events. I gave the opening night lecture, entitled “Miniatures in Life: the Role of Tiny Objects in Everyday Worlds,” which provided an introduction to the exhibition’s highlight objects, as well as an overview of the exhibition’s theme and organizing principles. A lecture by Douglass Bailey of San Francisco State University introduced the public to miniaturization theory, and a lecture by my co-curator Sharon Herbert of the University of Michigan

contextualized the exhibition within the broader trends and events of the Hellenistic world. A family day with kid-friendly activities focused on figurines, toys, and other miniature objects completed the public events calendar.

- 9 An exhibition like this one was by no means a solo venture. I was honored to have been invited to guest curate, along with Sharon Herbert, this important exhibition at the Kelsey Museum. For this invitation, I would like to thank Margaret Root, Sharon Herbert, and Dawn Johnson. Museum Director Chris Rattè was a gracious supervisory presence. The exhibitions and collections staff, especially Scott Meier, Sebastian Encina, and Michelle Fontenot, were tremendously helpful. I am additionally grateful to the Kelsey staff for allowing me to recruit four Bowling Green State University students as Kelsey Museum Interns; these four interns (Cathie Moore, Mariah Postlewait, Jess Pfundstein, and Julie Knechtges) have my sincere thanks for their tireless work throughout the exhibition design and installation process.

ABSTRACTS

The Kelsey Museum of Archaeology recently hosted a special exhibition, entitled *Life in Miniature: Identity and Display at Ancient Seleucia-on-the-Tigris*, co-curated by myself (Stephanie Langin-Hooper) and Sharon Herbert.

Indeed, the focus of the show was to illustrate how and why terracotta figurines and other miniatures were used in the everyday lives of the people of Seleucia-on-the-Tigris.

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