



museum of arts and design

MUSEUM OF ARTS AND DESIGN INVITES VISITORS INTO MINIATURE WORLD CREATED BY NEW YORK COLLECTOR JOANNA FISHER

The Fisher Dollhouse: A Venetian Palazzo in Miniature
May 8 — September 26, 2021



The Fisher Dollhouse: A Venetian Palazzo. Photos: Jenna Bascom.

NEW YORK, NY (April 21, 2021) – Inspired by Venice’s glamorous Gritti Palace, *The Fisher Dollhouse: A Venetian Palazzo in Miniature* will make its public debut at the Museum of Arts and Design (MAD) on May 8. With a fifteenth-century classical exterior and ten rooms filled with an eclectic range of historical and contemporary craft, art, and design rendered in miniature, *The Fisher Dollhouse: A Venetian Palazzo in Miniature* displays an impressive collection of contemporary art created by more than ten international artists, many of whom are working in miniature for the first time. New York collector, maker, and arts patron **Joanna Fisher** conceived of the dollhouse in response to the lockdown required by the COVID-19 pandemic. Like so many, she was housebound and felt her world shrink...and embraced it, literally. The dollhouse project offered Fisher a form of therapy: it provided a safe haven and, with ever-inward retreat during quarantine, an escape.

“The House Within’ is how I think about this project. A place people can go to in their minds,” said Fisher. “This was born in the pandemic. An emotional home I found within myself. A safe place created in my imagination. That is how this came to be.”

Fisher was familiar with the Museum of the City of New York’s Stettheimer Dollhouse. This, plus **Rachel Lee Hovnanian’s** suggestion that the project could be like a miniature version of **Peggy Guggenheim’s** Palazzo Venier dei Leoni, lead her to commission micro-artworks from artist friends and collaborators. All working in isolation, many found an unexpected sense of community in the creation of the dollhouse and the works within. **Peter Gerakaris’s** neo-Byzantine icon presented an introspective challenge of recreating an exacting process—painting with a brush of no more than three hairs. There are also sculptural works by prominent artists, including an abstracted figure by **Michele Oka Doner** and one trapped in glass by **Dustin Yellin**. An “ancestor portrait,” a reimagined image of Fisher by **Antonio Pio Saracino**, is mounted in a gilt frame. Artists **Tatyana Murray** and **Rachel Lee Hovnanian** both shrunk preexisting works: *Aquatic Dream* and *Body Armor*, respectively. Exquisite paintings were contributed by **Darren Waterston**, **Federico de Francesco**, and **Ryan McGinness**, whose family joined Fisher at a recent Thanksgiving celebration where their daughters played with dollhouses together. Waterston contributed an ethereal landscape in the same spirit as a series begun during the pandemic while **Hunt Slonem** gamely adapted his popular bunny imagery with smaller strokes. There’s also photography by **Veronica Gaido**. Many of these are set in elegantly crafted, ebonized, or gilded carved wood frames.



Select miniature artworks in situ created for *The Fisher Dollhouse: A Venetian Palazzo* by (l to r) Ryan McGinness, Hunt Slonum, and Peter Gerakaris. Photos: Jenna Bascom.

Another inspiration for Fisher was Queen Mary’s Dollhouse (long on display at Windsor Castle) that was presented to the Royal Family in 1924 in gratitude for bravery and leadership during the First World War. Designed by Edward Lutyens, it was the work of 1500 of the finest makers of its day. Some of the objects commissioned for it were replicated for *The Fisher Dollhouse: A Venetian Palazzo in Miniature*, which is also filled with scaled miniatures by contemporary makers as well as antiques and vintage pieces. Its Baroque-style fireplace is by a British maker **Sue Doviso**, who specializes in detailed architectural elements. Others, like the porcelain sink attributed to **Sonia Messer**, are testament to twentieth-century pioneers of dollhouse furniture manufacture. “Venetian” touches in the painted bombe chest and bust of Julius Caesar are by **David Castillo**, a miniaturist in Barcelona. The stunning Murano-style glass chandelier came from glass artists **Mario Ramos** and **Mariana Grande** in Madrid. **Fred Cobbs**, a revered miniature

metalworker in Georgia, made a range of tools and other items, from a watering can to a wine vat to an espresso machine.

Close looking is rewarded: a display cabinet teems with ammonites, which first appeared 240 million years ago; a ruby glass wine set fit for (and believed to be made for) Queen Anne; “bamboo” furniture, mouse-sized preserves, a powder horn, and a masquerade mask. Specialties are evident in miniature foods, elaborately bound books, clay olive jars, and wigs. While no dolls dwell here, animals do, in the form of a pheasant, a monkey riding a camel, and ceramic dogs, one housed in its own magnificent dog bed by jeweler **Laura Lobdell**. The needlepoint rugs Fisher designed and made herself. Many of the makers, like one who refashioned WWI bullet casings into the legs of a brass table, remain unknown.

The dollhouse was made to order by British set designer **Holly Jo Beck**, who has worked at the Folger Theatre in Washington, D.C. and now works primarily as an animator. In both form and details, the dollhouse draws on specific places such as the Palazzos da Mula Morosini and Bernardo a San Polo. For Fisher, it evokes memories of a favorite hotel, the Gritti Palace, built as a noble residence in the fifteenth century on Venice’s Grand Canal. The pink facade also suggests to Fisher a local landmark, Julian Schnabel’s Palazzo Chupi in Greenwich Village. Such associations offer flights of fancy during a time of curtailed travel and cancelled plans.

A “house within a house,” as poet and critic **Susan Stewart** wrote nearly thirty years ago in *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, the dollhouse exposes tensions between the inside and outside worlds. Sanctuary and prison, this “most consummate of miniatures” also confronts “the inaccessibility of what cannot be lived.” A condition intensified by the pandemic that Fisher has felt intensely. “While this dollhouse was a solitary exercise,” she noted, “it somehow brought me closer to people all over the world, creating its own social network, balancing out the isolation of this pandemic.”

The Fisher Dollhouse: A Venetian Palazzo in Miniature is a work in progress, one Fisher plans to return to. For now, this dollhouse’s secret rooms, where one could imagine curling up or entertaining at a moment’s notice, have been fixed in time and opened up so that visitors can inhabit and enjoy.



Collector Joanna Fisher with *The Fisher Dollhouse: A Venetian Palazzo*. Photo: Jenna Bascom.



Select miniature furniture created for *The Fisher Dollhouse: A Venetian Palazzo*. Photos: Jenna Bascom.

EXHIBITION CREDITS

The Fisher Dollhouse: A Venetian Palazzo in Miniature was curated by Caroline Hannah.

This exhibition is made possible through Joanna Fisher's support and efforts.

ABOUT THE MUSEUM OF ARTS AND DESIGN

The Museum of Arts and Design (MAD) champions contemporary makers across creative fields and presents the work of artists, designers, and artisans who apply the highest level of ingenuity and skill. Since the Museum's founding in 1956 by philanthropist and visionary Aileen Osborn Webb, MAD has celebrated all facets of making and the creative processes by which materials are transformed, from traditional techniques to cutting-edge technologies. Today, the Museum's curatorial program builds upon a rich history of exhibitions that emphasize a cross-disciplinary approach to art and design, and reveals the workmanship behind the objects and environments that shape our everyday lives. MAD provides an international platform for practitioners who are influencing the direction of cultural production and driving twenty-first-century innovation, and fosters a participatory setting for visitors to have direct encounters with skilled making and compelling works of art and design. For more information, visit madmuseum.org.

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