

The Catherine Palace

A Major Donation Brings a World-Class Exhibit to Maysville

By Sharon Doddroe

One of the joys of visiting the Kathleen Savage Browning Miniatures Collection at the Kentucky Gateway Museum Center is being able to travel the world in an afternoon—and in whatever time period you prefer—by simply peering into one of the many historically accurate room boxes in the 3,300-square-foot gallery. Enjoy an 18th century dinner party in the townhome of Princess Diana’s ancestors, a safari vacation in Kenya, a private room on the fated *Titanic*, or a few drinks while gossiping with stylish flappers of the 1920s. It’s all possible, and this January you can stamp another exciting destination to your miniature passport with the collection’s acquisition of the Catherine Palace, the legendary summer residence of the Russian tsars.

“This exhibit is not only breathtaking, it’s monumental in the sense that it has never been on display,” explains Kaye Savage Browning, curator for the collection. “It was in the private home of well-known miniature collector, Carole Kaye, but not exhibited to the public. I was able to see it as a work-in-progress at the Kensington Dollhouse Festival in London about ten years ago, and even in its incomplete state I was overwhelmed by its grandeur.”

The Catherine Palace, created by British miniaturist Robert Dawson, is a 1:12-scale (one inch to one foot) reproduction of one of the world’s most opulent and storied castles. Originally constructed in 1717 for Peter the Great and his wife, Catherine I, it started out, by all accounts, as a modest stone structure surrounded by trees on the banks of the Neva River near St. Petersburg, Russia. When the couple’s daughter, Elizabeth I, took over the throne, however, she found the home to be small and simple and ordered it to be reconstructed as a residence to rival Versailles. The result was a blue-and-white Baroque fairy-tale castle studded with more than 220 pounds of gold gilt.

The Empress’s lavish tastes extended to the interior, as well, and throughout her reign, she commissioned numerous renovations and extravagances. When her daughter-in-law, Cath-



erine the Great, overthrew her dreadful husband and began to rule, she, too, added her influence, which included neoclassical and Pompeiiian styles created with some of the finest materials and workmanship offered at the time. Through the years and the wars, the palace would be destroyed and rebuilt several times, but its captivating story continues to inspire, which is one of the reasons Dawson, owner of the Modelroom, is thrilled that his work will now be displayed to the public. Browning is also at a loss for words on the generous gift.

“I never thought I would have the chance to own one of Robert’s pieces,” says Browning, who was approached about the donation early last year. Over the summer, special crates were built to transport the 700-pound structure to

The 1:12-scale reproduction of the Catherine Palace was a donation to the KSB Miniatures Collection.

Maysville where assistant curator Linda Young and Browning’s daughter, artist Carey Seven, will do restoration work before presenting it to the public. In the meantime, Browning found herself back in London last month at the Kensington Dollhouse Festival.

“The palace came with most of its original furnishings, but like any new homeowner, I wanted to add a few touches,” says Browning. And who wouldn’t when you’re talking about shopping for chandeliers, candelabrum, crystal goblets, and other miniature 18th century *objets d’art*. One particular item Browning brought

Intricate parquet floors and several hundred miniature candle lights were created by Robert Dawson to replicate the Great Hall.

back is a six-piece table setting by Miyuki Nagashima to replicate the Sèvres Green Ware that the Empresses would have dined upon. It will be placed in the Green Dining Room along with flatware by Mike Sparrow and crystal from Gerd Felka—choices Catherine herself may have made if she were a miniaturist.

Five other rooms will be furnished including a reproduction of the famous Amber Room, which contains glowing mosaic panels of amber framed with mirrored pilasters, gilded carvings, and sconces. The room “disappeared” during World War II, but prior to being dismantled and moved, it was considered the “eighth wonder of the world.” After decades of work, the room was re-created at a cost of 12 million dollars and opened to the public in 2003.

Dawson, who visited the Russian palace while doing extensive research for the miniature, created the walls of the Amber Room in steps. After the architectural decoration was applied, the pattern for the amber was engraved into the surface of tiny pieces, each no more than about an eighth of an inch, and then individually painted to replicate amber. Thin layers of varnish were then built up over the pieces to give the depth and translucency of the fossilized gemstone. Other furnished rooms include the Chinese Blue Room, the Blue Study called “the Snuffbox,” the Great Hall, and the Agate Rooms.

It took Dawson and his team one year to create the Catherine Palace, which he had the privilege of seeing displayed in all its glory at the Florida home of its previous owner. He hopes to someday view the work again in the KSB Miniatures Collection. Until then, his hope is that the exhibit will inspire others to learn more about one of the world’s finest royal residences. “The real palace has such an extraordinary history and the story of its rebuilding in the rigors and hardships of post-war soviet Russia fascinates me. I hope this miniature pays some tribute to the men and women who were involved in its amazing story.”

The Catherine Palace will be displayed in the changing exhibit hall of the Kentucky Gateway Museum Center from January 26th to April 30th.

The Green Dining Room of the Catherine Palace will display porcelain reproductions of the place settings used during the reign of Catherine the Great.

