

A little wagon full of wonders

Iris Arentz shares her joyous miniature Garden Gnomes Residence with us

BY PAM NORTH

Belgian resident Iris Arentz first become interested in miniatures from something her grandparents had in their home: an old dimensional wall diorama showing a lovely cupboard with tin plates on shelves, a table with flowers in a vase, and a fireplace with a Madonna on the mantelpiece. “I loved it as a child,” Iris explained, “and I inherited it when they passed away in the late 1970s. It was then that my father told me that it was made from scratch by one of my great-uncles from cigar boxes and bottle caps. I wanted to try it myself, but I could not get the perspective right, so I made my first interior in a wooden wine box instead.”

Retired now from 20 years of working for a bank, plus 10 more years for a

Right: The welcoming front entrance to the Gypsy wagon.







Left: Someone has been busy painting lots of gnomes to help keep the garden tidy.

telecom company, Iris now spends her time doing what she loves – making 1:12 scale, fully-decorated, shabby vintage and country-style shops, market stalls, and other displays, despite having no formal training in the miniature field.



“My husband endures my mess with love and patience. My children look at me with a mixture of ‘she can’t help it because she is an artist and a little bit crazy’, but they show off my work to all their friends and sometimes, when I get very lucky, someone tells me I am a genius!” She finds it easy combining home life and miniature life, “because I do the miniatures and the cooking, and my husband does the rest.”

She finds inspiration just by looking around her, and wondering how she could make this or that, and with which materials. She finds it easy to part with her creations, for, as she said,

“things do not matter so much to me – the fun lies in the making of them.”

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Iris described her work area as a “large table in my living room, with a trolley next to me filled with little boxes, tools, paint, glue, etc., backed up by a garage filled with materials and tools.” She exhibits her products for sale at the Dolls House Show in Arnhem, Netherlands, and at the 1zu12 Die Messe, in Rheda-

Wiedenbrück, Germany. She runs workshops, at her home or at shows, for small groups (maximum 8 people). She makes a model shop, stall, or display, then shows the students how to realize it themselves. They come for a session (+/-6 hours) 3 times or more, depending on the project, with a 2-week interval between the sessions to make their “homework”.

Over the years, Iris has made things for: The Miniatures Museum of Taiwan, The Carole Kaye Museum, The Toys Museum

Below: A pair of bats sleep by the window. Mushrooms are a plenty around the wagon. Garden tools are kept around back.





Right: Sunlight streams through the tiny window over the plants.

in Basel, Switzerland. and more recently the Prince of Qatar became one of her regular customers.

Iris recently created a detailed piece she named, *Garden Gnomes Residence*, in 1:12 scale, a whimsical rendering of a Gypsy wagon gnome home. “I had made a similar project about 15 years ago, gnomes in a thatched cottage. At the request of my workshop students, I agreed to do it again, but

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as I don't like making the same thing twice, this time a painting of an old Gypsy wagon was inspiration for the living accommodation of my gnomes family. I asked Albert Holzner of Miniwelt, Germany, to build the wagon after the model pictured. The rest is made by me, except for the glass jars, cutlery, and stools. Materials used were wood, paint, paper, cardboard, fabric, Sculpey clay dolls.





Right: The inside of the wagon is overflowing with beautiful details.

She shared ten of her main techniques: “1) I paint with acrylic paint, using different kinds of patinas and stains to give the paint a used and weathered finish; 2) I always use Lepage Express Quick Dry Wood Glue or Pattex Glue to glue wood/paper/fabric, and Pattex Repair Extreme to glue metal and glass; 3) to make bushes and plants I am a serial killer of thyme plants because they do not break easily even when they are dead; 4) to make plants/flowers I print the real petals/leaves on recto/verso paper strips to get the





Above: The tiny kitchen has everything needed for cooking.

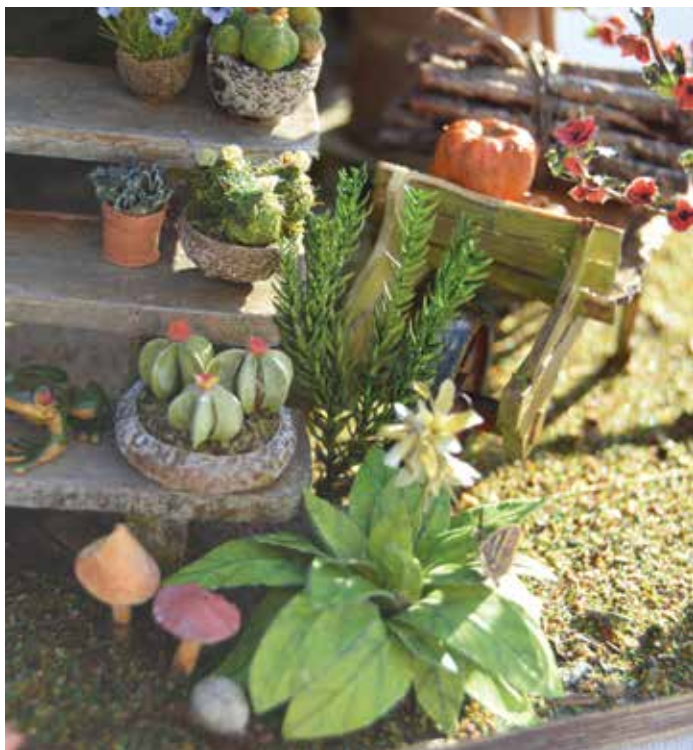
exact colors. I punch or cut them with fine scissors and glue them on stems or on the thyme branches; 5) to make galvanized metal items I print templates on gray paper, and use self-adhesive zinc tape to cover those. To get the old, used look the zinc tape is sanded, then gets a patina with a mixture of white acrylic paint (matte) and black metal stove polish; 6) to get the right scale/color fabric, I look on the internet for samples, adapt them as I want, and print them on Ink jet 100 % cotton fabric sheets, as it is very thin and

very easy to glue or stitch together; 7) As I mostly use printed paper and cardboard to make miniatures, I finish everything I make with acrylic matte varnish to fix the colors and keep them from fading when on display in the sunlight; 8) I avoid working with paint, glue, or other components which are unhealthy for people and the environment; 9) I boil Fimo items in salt water. It takes only 3 minutes to get hard, and I prefer that method over baking in the oven; 10) To get a used and weathered look, almost nothing has to be exactly straight, therefore, I rarely use rulers or measuring tapes.”

The hardest part for her in making this project were the dolls. “They were difficult to make, but after throwing away several corpses, I finally was nearly satisfied with my little creatures!” she joked. “My favorite part about the piece was the left side, the table with paint and brushes where the garden gnomes are being painted and restored. It also was fun to make the wild flowers.”

As for it turning out exactly as she had envisioned it, she remarked, “I never

Right: The wagon front steps are lined with tiny plants.



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have an exact idea of how a finished project will look because during the process of making it difficulties and/or possibilities often are encountered which lead to a different outcome. In this case the problem was the dolls. I had asked several doll makers to make them for me, but no one had the time or possibility to do so, so I bought a book about making garden gnomes, reduced them to an acceptable scale, and made them myself. The piece will be on display in Arnhem, and if it isn't sold there, it goes to Rheda Wiedenbrück this fall. I don't know yet what the price will be exactly.”

Looking ahead, Iris has a few projects in different states of progress: a second-hand bookstall as seen on the banks of the River Seine in Paris; a small greenhouse with a cactus collection; a Provence meat, wine and cheese shop; a Moroccan restaurant; a hippie shop; a



perfume shop; and a ladies gift shop. “I like what I do, I'm 69 years old, and I hope to be in good health to continue doing this for many years to come. The future of miniatures has promise. I see very old ladies coming to the shows, but also a younger generation who is interested

in making miniatures, and I think that is a good thing.”

