From Child's Toy to a Special Heirloom

by Pam North

Deri Terry's latest project involved turning a ready-made dollhouse into a faux vintage classic. As she explained, “Through the years, I have longed for a miniature French farmhouse, painted in the colors of Provençe, slightly faded by the sun and kissed with the patina of age. I've spent years searching for the perfect house, never finding what I wanted, and realizing if I did, it probably was going to be expensive.” Despite having built and decorated several dollhouses and room boxes, Terry was undecided how to accomplish her next vision, so she explored several options. She didn't wish to build a dollhouse from scratch with a kit, so she focused more on quicker gratification. With her background in interior design, her fulfillment derived more from the finishing details and colors, rather than with the building process. She had done lots of home improvement on several real-life homes throughout the years, so why not a miniature fixer-upper?

Determined to economically attain the house she had dreamed about, she decided to search for a completed dollhouse that she could renovate. That mission proved fruitless, but an online search led her to a new, multi-story dollhouse sold by *Melissa & Doug*, a company known for their sturdy, well-made toys. Although the house was pink and purple, the lines of the mansard roof were authentic, and assembly of the wood house would be a quick 30 minutes. Knowing she could turn it into the perfect French farmhouse, she placed the order, and when the box arrived, she set to work immediately.

She chalk-painted the entire house as the first step, since chalk paint requires no primer, and she completed the flooring before assembly, gluing down printed flooring paper. She decided that plaster exterior walls would infuse the house with French country flavor, so the outside shell was covered with spackle, easily purchased in a small tub at a home improvement store. The shutters came from a hobby store, except for the top center roof dormer, which was fashioned out of tongue depressors and balsa wood, using strips of a paper plate for hinges. She had decided to shutter the center dormer because the door was not full-scale, but the addition of the shutter nicely added character to the French country feel of the house. “Sometimes problems spark the best ideas,” she remarked. The elimination of the dormer door made the top balcony obsolete, resulting in the house having a single, rose-entwined balcony. She purchased tiny vines from the craft store, and also micro paper roses sold for paper crafting, and she glued on the vines and roses, twining them to hang naturally; she even painted a brown wash over one rose for realism, simulating its fading on the vine. Door handles were glued atop backplates, cut from a paper plate, to cover the unusually large holes at the door openings. She painted the backplates and hinges in a bronze-colored acrylic craft paint, with a small amount of black added. Over one side door, she built a small pergola from scratch, using balsa wood. The supporting brackets were cut from a plastic gate designed for a miniature Christmas village, imitating the look of wrought iron and evoking a European flavor to the garden, enhanced by the addition of a rustic fountain in the front yard. To imitate the look of a lead roof, she cut strips of the balsa wood and glued them onto the roof, which was painted gray, then weathered with a wash of a lighter shade. The house and trimmings were painted in taupe, blue, and off-white chalk paint. Finally, the entire house was washed with a watered-down, dark wax made to finish chalk-painted surfaces, adding an instant patina of age.

When the structure was completed, her husband cut a plywood base, large enough to accommodate the house and landscaping, and miniature stones were glued to outline the base and create walkways to the side doors. Spaces between the stone paths were filled in with sand, and the tiny gray stones covering the rest of the landscape were candle filler. The bicycle came from a craft store; the spots of rust were created by gluing a dusting of cinnamon in key areas, and the dirt on the wheels simulated with dried, used tea leaves. A resin basket holds a bouquet (fashioned from more paper roses), a bottle of wine, a baguette, and a postal package giving the impression that its rider has arrived from town with items for the perfect countryside picnic, including the folded, checkered tablecloth.

The only tools she used were scissors, an Exacto knife for the flooring paper, an old credit card to spread spackle, and a hot glue gun. The renovation took three weeks, and is a true reflection of the charming, French country home Terry had envisioned. “I can't wait to finish the interior, and decorate the house in Provençal style. I already have added beams to the ceilings for country ambience. Planning the décor, and searching for special pieces to add to my little home, will provide enjoyment for years to come. For me, it's a treasure hunt, and I can't imagine a more fulfilling hobby!”

She hopes to inspire those who are interested in realizing their dream of a custom dollhouse, but who may be lacking in skills, budget, or time to build something complicated. By starting with a pre-existing dollhouse, the project is much less difficult and more affordable, with limitless possibilities.

This sturdy dollhouse was sold as a child's toy, but with a little imagination, and a bit of personalization, it can now be heralded as an heirloom, and is Terry's own fabulous fixer-upper.

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