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The Miniature Monuments of ACE Architects

In December, 2013, editors of Room One Thousand visited the beautiful hilltop home of Lucia Howard and David Weingarten in Lafayette, California. Howard and Weingarten, both of whom are CED alumni, are the principals of ACE Architects, a small design practice based out of Oakland, California. They're also serious collectors and brokers of architectural souvenirs, including everything from original etchings of Piranesi's vedute series to replicas of classical and gothic monuments to cast-iron piggy bank skyscrapers that kept American kids happy when their parents finished signing a new mortgage. What started as a couple of mementos from a trip that Weingarten once took with an architecturally-inclined uncle, Charles Moore, has developed into an astounding collection that includes pieces from almost every continent and each of the last four centuries. It's so big and so all-encompassing that Weingarten and Howard decided to transform their entire home, which was a prototypical California ranch house, into a living museum-slash-showroom of architectural curiosities. Except for the kitchen, every space on the property, including an entire addition that they refer to as the "Piraneseum," has the dual function of storing and displaying their souvenirs. And maybe the kitchen, too, if one counts the salt and pepper shakers.

Weingarten and Howard are happy to share their collection with the public. From December 2010 until May 2011, they loaned a selection of miniature buildings to SFO Museum at San Francisco International Airport for an exhibition on the Grand Tour, that boozy “study abroad” program for aesthetically-inclined English aristocrats from the 17th, 18th, and early 19th centuries. For curators, charting the itinerary of the Tour with ACE’s monumental miniatures was a convenient way to reduce a multi-continent, sometimes multi-year experience down to only a couple of minutes before an acrylic display case, allowing coffee-sipping airport-goers to imagine the trip from Reims Cathedral, through the Alps, to the Pantheon, and back. Not only does the small-scale exhibition strategy seem like an effective mode of architectural outreach, but it must have spurred some interesting self-reflection about the act and meaning of travel. How was traveling then different from traveling now? At the very least, thinking through miniatures seems like a stimulating alternative to waiting at the terminal gate and scrolling through email.

Plus, the exhibition presents an interesting historical twist. The miniature buildings from Howard and Weingarten’s collection aren’t just icons that represent a famous itinerary. As souvenirs, many of older items from ACE’s collection are actually memorials to the direct experience of travel, freighted with meaning that is simply unavailable to the contemporary passerby. Young English noblemen of course wanted to remember the good times abroad, so in addition to keeping journals and notating their guide books, they frequently commissioned local craftsmen in places like Germany and Italy to replicate buildings in miniature as mnemonic devices, which they could then pack up in their bags and bring home. In an age before photographs and postcards, these replicas from the Tour were perhaps the first real architectural souvenirs. They weren’t used as models within a process of architectural production.

What kind of memories the miniatures helped to preserve was, of course, indeterminate. We know that the majority of Englishmen who went on the Tour never bothered to engage in serious architectural study, so they weren't storehouses of architectural principle or style. But when flowers weren't available in the winter, for example (before the greenhouse building craze), miniature buildings could serve English hosts as another kind of architecture parlante: that is, as table centerpieces that might help to enliven conversation at a dinner party. Their purpose was therefore profoundly anti-nostalgic; they were a means to get away from the immediate present of domestic life on the Isles, if only via the momentary anecdote, as well as objects one used to mark his cultural distinction. When miniatures were kept in a bedroom or on a private desk, however, they might help an English gentleman recall what happened late that wine-soaked night on the far side of the Coliseum. As mnemonic devices, then, they could be very social, very private, or both. The question for us is how ACE's Grand Tour miniatures differ from the Golden Gate Bridge snow globes or "I <3 SF" t-shirts that one impulsively buys at the airport gift shop. Not just in terms of the mass production of the souvenirs, but also the mass production of travel itself.

Howard and Weingarten are currently putting together a new SFO Museum exhibition on their Piranesium, which will include etchings, engravings, paintings, and more of their famous architectural miniatures. One more reason this year to get to the airport early!



For more information, see Majua and Weingarten's *Souvenir Buildings, Miniature Monuments: From the Collection of ACE Architects* (Harry Abrams Inc., 1996), as well as www.aceland.com and www.piraneseum.com. ACE will be exhibiting much of their collection at the San Francisco Fall Antiques Show, running October 23-26, 2014.