

Photographs by Michael Puff
Article by Martha Puff

AN ARTISTIC COUPLE IN PURSUIT OF EXCELLENCE

A passion for the decorative and fine arts aptly describes Michele Carter and Dan Worsham of PepperWood Miniatures. Both push creative boundaries with their art and design, work independently, yet at the same time nourish each other's careers. Home for this dynamic couple is PepperWood Farm in the East San Jose foothills of California.

Michele Carter, I.G.M.A. Fellow

Michele is very artistic and creative, with more ideas for projects than she has time to do. Her interests include miniatures, art, architecture, history, music, her dogs, and gardening. A passion for art and design has defined her entire life. "As soon as I could hold a crayon, I started drawing and never stopped," Michele says.

After majoring in Graphic Design and Advertising at the Massachusetts College of Art, she spent the next twenty-five years moving up the corporate ladder. When the economy spiraled downward in 2001, Michele turned her professional art training and lifelong miniature hobby into a home-based business. She began creating 1/12th scale floral arrangements, paintings, garden structures, and accessories.

One thing that sets Michele apart a bit from other floral artists is the garden structures she makes like gazebos, trellises, arbors, and wishing wells. "I have acquired building skills in workshops from artisans like Brooke Tucker, Whitledge & Burgess, the Guys from Texas, and Rik Pierce," she says. "I have also taken lots of classes at the Guild School in Castine, Maine. This will be my sixth year as a student."

Inspiration for her floral designs come from three sources: First, whatever is in bloom at the time. Another is to look at a vase or vessel and visualize what will look good in it. The third is to turn to one of her many books on flowers and floral arrangements. "Both Dan and I collect books and frequently consult our huge reference library."

To assure that flowers look realistic, Michele likes to work from real life. "I actually dissect blooms to determine their structure," she says. "If I can't find a real flower from which to work, I look for the best, most detailed photos I can find." To get the colors accurate, she paints right onto stems, blossoms, and leaves of real plants. She tries various shades of paint to find the one that matches exactly. "Sometimes I have to brighten the colors in order to make them look correct in 1/12th scale. The eye can't see subtle colors very well when looking at tiny objects, so color and detail need to be exaggerated."

Her basic tools include hundreds of different punches and several sizes of ball stylus (from tiny to large). She relies on a lace tool, small pair of very sharp scissors, fine natural-bristle paint brushes, and--most importantly--surgical-style tweezers.

For Michele, the best part of making miniatures is the creative process of trying to figure out how to make something look organic that is made with paper, glue, paint and wire. "I feel quite a 'rush' of satisfaction when I show a new piece at a mini show and get 'oohs' and 'aahs.' That's the payoff."

Michele's studio is one room in the house and is a dedicated space. "We use every inch of floor and wall space in the room," she laughingly says. "We have a pending move back East and I see a huge studio in our future at the next house, wherever that may be." In

her new studio, Michele sees herself not only continuing with her floral designs, but having the room to work on her miniature hobby – historically accurate room boxes.

Prices for her floral designs range from \$125 to \$500. She accepts commissions. The plants made from Leaf Sheets start around \$25 and go up to \$125.

“The best part of doing miniature shows is the feeling of community, both with the customers and the other dealers,” Michele observes, and being exposed to the best artisans in the industry.”

Dan Worsham, I.G.M.A. Artisan

Dan can best be described as creative and multi-talented, with a thirst for knowledge. He is a gentleman with a lot of interests. A huge Nascar fan, he did a little racing as a young man, winning a trophy in a local race. Music is a big part of his life. For more than thirty years, Dan has regularly played guitar with a group of friends--mostly classic old rock and blues songs.

His interest in miniatures started as a young boy when he discovered scale model car kits. He also remembers sitting at his Italian grandmother’s kitchen table drawing elaborate World War II battle scenes on huge pieces of butcher paper. Dan was greatly influenced by his immigrant grandfather, a fine Italian cabinetmaker who crafted masterpieces in wood for William Randolph Hearst, Herbert Hoover, and other renowned patrons.

Following in his grandfather's footsteps, Dan developed a passion for the decorative arts and became fascinated with the masterworks of Louis Comfort Tiffany. After serving as an apprentice artisan, he opened Worsham Art Glass in Los Gatos, California in 1976. “I enjoyed a successful stained glass art business for over fifteen years,” Dan says. “Then the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake rearranged my life, as well as all of my earthly possessions.”

The move into miniature art glass was made with Michele’s encouragement. She asked Dan to try creating 1:12 scale hand-painted reproductions of his favorite Tiffany lamps. He was reluctant as he was afraid he couldn’t make them look correct. “Tiffany used colored opalescent glass, not clear glass, and most of the glass paints were transparent,” Michele explains. “Eventually Dan found a glass paint that gives the look of opalescent glass. We are both happy with the results.”

Dan has many books on Tiffany lamps and stained glass windows that he refers to when he interprets patterns into 1/12th scale. He also designs his own patterns for lamps and windows after the Tiffany style.

After his successful foray into Tiffany lamps, Michele convinced him to try painting in miniature. A portrait of Captain Gregg from the movie “The Ghost and Mrs. Muir” was Dan’s first painting in miniature. “This was a commission about which I was contacted,” Michele says. “Although I do paint, I am not as good at people as my husband, so I passed the commission to Dan,” His second painting was one that Michele requested for her Tudor room box. “I asked him to paint ‘Portrait of a Lady’ (Rogier Van der Weyden, c.1455) for my birthday. It is breathtaking, and I cherish it.”

At Michele’s suggestion, in 2007 Dan took a class at the Guild School from the fine miniature painter Johannes Landmann. “Dan increased his skills and learned some good techniques,” Michele says. “He came back from the workshop totally inspired and has been painting non-stop since then.”

His favorite illustrators are Howard Pyle, N.C. Wyeth, and Maxfield Parrish. Dan also admires the romantic realism of academic painters from the late 1800’s like John Singer

Sargent, Winslow Homer, Alma-Tadema, and Bouguereau. Fascinated by the exotic Orientalist School, his favorite artist from that genre is Jean-Léon Gérôme. Researching from his vast collection of art books and on the Internet, Dan looks for paintings that “speak” to him. He then reproduces the painting in 1:12 scale, trying to copy the style as well as the substance of each work.

Finding good, high-quality reference photos is the hardest part. “Without a good reference picture, the miniature painting will suffer,” Dan says. “You can find three pictures of the same painting from three separate sources, and all three will look different--sometimes wildly so. I have to use my own judgment and paint it the way I think it looks the best.”

Dan uses fine plywood for the “canvas,” an Ott light for good illumination, magnifying glasses, and lots of tiny good quality sable-hair brushes. “They wear out quickly when there are only a few hairs in the brush,” Dan observes. “If a hair sheds from a brush, it can ruin a painting.” He uses a glazing technique (paint mixed with a lot of medium) to lightly paint layers and build up the shadows and colors in the painting. He finds this necessary to achieve the delicate details.

Like Michele, Dan finds the process of making the piece of art the most rewarding. Once the painting, lamp or window is done, he is on to the next challenge. He accepts commissions and works exclusively in 1:12 scale. Paintings range from \$300 to \$650. Lamps sell in the \$100 to \$350 range.

Both enjoy reading a good book and taking long walks together with their dogs. Dan also relaxes by playing music and watching movies. “I love building and furnishing the room boxes made taking classes with the pros,” Michele adds. She hopes to be remembered as a fine artisan with a gift for color and composition, who loved miniatures as a hobby. Dan would like to be remembered for his paintings.

Visit PepperWood Miniatures at www.pepperwoodminiatures.com to see more of their exceptional handmade pieces.