

PepperWood Miniatures: California Teamin'

By Deb Weissler

Photos by Michael Puff

For almost 6 years, IGMA Artisans Michele Carter and Dan Worsham have charmed the miniature world with their stunning collage of miniature paintings, flower arrangements, and stained glass lamps. On an acre of land in central California, their property abounds with huge pepper trees that became the perfect moniker for their home-based miniature business, PepperWood Miniatures. When fate first brought them together, neither had inklings the role Michele's miniature hobby would play in their lives.

As a child, Michele's post-war tin dolls house provided an endless source of make believe and, along with her artistic talents, determined her life's course. As soon as she was old enough to hold a crayon, art consumed Michele's life. Her drawing and painting talents garnered an acceptance to the prestigious Massachusetts College of Art where she majored in Graphic Design and Advertising, with 4 years of required painting and drawing classes.

For more than 3 decades Michele created award-winning book designs and advertising brochures for the corporate world. In her spare time she continued to paint, exhibiting and selling her paintings at galleries in the Boston area where she lived. Eventually her career took her to Silicon Valley as a marketing communications executive. When the dot.com bubble burst in 2001, Michele suddenly found ample opportunity to explore other options and her old hobbies, art and miniatures, juxtaposed into a home-based business--miniature art and flowers.

Inspiration came from her own garden at PepperWood farm and from a fellow miniaturist and friend, who showed Michele how to fashion her first miniature blooms--roses and daisies. Pleased with the results, she experimented and was instantly hooked. "Trying to make something organic using paper, wire, and glue was such a challenge that I became totally absorbed." Determined to create the most realistic looking flowers, Michele spent years refining her techniques. In 2004, she enrolled in flower classes at the Guild School in Castine, Maine, learning additional construction techniques and finishes that brought breathtaking depth and dimension to her flowers.

Her first commission came quite literally by accident. A rose had fallen from an arrangement Michele had shown to a miniature shop saleswoman, and the woman had taped it to the register as a reminder to call Michele about the lost flower. A customer spotted the single bloom and in, awe of its beauty, ordered a mini hotel lobby-sized arrangement in yellow, blue, and white. "She said she didn't care how much it cost; it just had to be big and beautiful. I worked on it for three weeks and she loved it. I still use a photo of that bouquet on my business card."

2002 saw Michele's debut at the Tom Bishop San Francisco fair. Not knowing what to expect, she was thrilled with customers' positive feedback and encouraged to continue by the sale of a few pieces. "Looking back I realize I was lucky to sell anything. Many buyers have a comfort level buying from known artisans. Even though my work was good, I felt grateful that customers took a leap of faith and purchased from a newbie."

Five years later Michele is a fair pro. "The best part of doing miniature fairs is the feeling of community, both with customers and other dealers. Everyone attending "gets" miniatures and why we are all so passionate about them. It's often difficult to explain to non-mini people why you are making these tiny things! Customers love to talk about their projects and share their collections."

Michele's studio is the one room in their home that is a dedicated space. Every square foot is filled with work tables, cabinets and stacked drawers filled with materials. Her day is split between

creating flowers in her studio and working in her office, answering emails and creating and printing Leaf Sheets™ on her computer.

“For my floral arrangements I use all different kinds of paper, depending on the flower. For really delicate blooms I prefer something lightweight like painted crepe paper or air mail letter paper that makes petals look most natural. For larger blooms that need more structure I use Japanese silk paper or ribbon paper.” Michele’s flowers are hand painted to achieve ultimate realism. Petals, leaves, and stalks receive a subtle palette of color. Bare and paper-covered wire form stems and branches. Dried seeds, flowers, greenery, grasses, pinecones, leaves, twigs and amaranthus embellish her wreaths and Christmas decorations.

With more than 60 different Leaf Sheets designs thus far, from African Mask to Zebra plant, Michele also supplies plant and flower making sheets to do-it-yourself miniaturists who wish to try their hand at crafting their own house plants, landscape plantings and flowers. “I primarily do plants that are highly colorful and/or have bold graphic patterns. As a flower and plant maker, I don’t even like to paint a gazillion leaves in order to make a plant. So for a person who lacks painting skills, I’ve done the hardest part for them.”

Michele makes samples of each plant so people can see what they look like made up. These are also for sale for the folks who aren’t ‘crafty’ but just want to buy. In addition to foliage, she also provides a few popular flowers: pansy faces and primrose petals and leaves. And will soon introduce sheets of wild morning glory vine and Poinsettia. Increasingly popular, her Leaf Sheets comprise almost 50% of her show revenue.

When a miniature hobbyist turns her love of miniatures into a business, there are consequences. With a collection of roomboxes built in workshops taught by the likes of Brooke Tucker, the Guys from Texas, Rik Pierce, and the team of Whittedge-Burgess, Michele’s roomboxes have taken a back seat as her days are spent creating exquisite miniature paintings and flower arrangements to fill the vignettes of others. But with the positive feedback she receives from a growing list of customers, she wouldn’t have it any other way

While Michele climbed the corporate ladder, Dan Worsham was busy creating fabulous art glass at his studio, Worsham Art Glass. Following in the footsteps of his grandfather, a master cabinetmaker from Italy, Dan developed a passion for decorative arts. Studying art and design at Foothill College in CA, Dan concentrated on drawing and painting. Fascinated with stained and leaded glass, he studied the works of Louis Comfort Tiffany and decided to try his hand at stained glass windows and lamps.

He apprenticed for Alexander Art Glass but as his work soon surpassed his teachers, he struck out on his own, garnering several awards and running a successful business. When the Loma Prieta earthquake struck on October 17, 1989, destroying the business Dan had worked so hard to establish, his life’s course was altered forever. The quake moved his glass studio off its foundation and 3 feet down the hill, turning his stained glass into a pile of rubble. Two weeks later, in San Jose for a trade fair, Michele employed the services of a company that specialized in trade fair equipment; Dan happened to be one of the installers. “What the quake hadn’t rearranged, meeting her did,” Dan laughs. It was love at first sight and they have been together ever since.

After helping Michele complete a dolls house kit, Michele recruited Dan to try his hand at making miniature Art Nouveau Tiffany lamps and windows. Dan hesitated. Tiffany used colored opalescent glass in lieu of clear stained glass, and most glass paints are transparent. Unsure he could recreate the proper look, Dan experimented and eventually found a technique that created the look he was after.

His lamps are based on actual Tiffany patterns and bases, designs selected from his extensive reference library. The shades are hand-painted on acrylic using liquid lead and glass paints and the lamp bases are cast in resin and faux painted to look like copper, brass, or bronze. When lit, the lamps glow with the same richness of color as their full-sized counterparts. A modest man, Dan is still surprised when collectors buy his work, despite the fact 5 of his lamps now reside in the prestigious Miniatures Museum of Taiwan.

But it is now Dan's paintings that have now taken the forefront in his miniature pursuits. "I paint in oil on birch with a hand-sanded gesso finish." Having painted full-size for years, Dan tried his hand at painting in 1:12 scale after some urging from his wife. "To my surprise, it was more satisfying than working full-size. I learn a lot from copying the techniques of the masters."

At the 2007 Guild School, Dan studied under IGMA Fellow Johannes Landmann, a master miniature painter. His portrait class taught Dan the technique of glazing, using layers of transparent paint to build color and depth.

At miniature fairs one rarely finds Dan. "I travel with Michele to all our local fairs when I'm not tied up with my real job. I went to our first Chicago International fair but quickly decided it would be much more financially responsible for her to travel alone and share a room. When I retire I hope to travel to all the fairs." Meanwhile Michele represents her husband's work.

And with retirement just around the corner, Dan and Michele are exploring greener pastures. The high cost of living and retiring in California has the couple heading east to the lush green of northern New England. "It will be difficult leaving California," Dan reflects. "I was born here and my entire family is here, but I fell in love with Maine when I came for Guild School this summer. It just says retirement to me."

For almost 18 years, life for both artists has been one big adventure, and this move promises to be more of the same. Fortunately they carry their talents with them wherever they settle. Lucky for us!

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