

Wednesday, Dec. 8, 2010

All the small things: Miniature art exhibit at the Mansion

by Topher Forhecz | Staff Writer

Fine art comes in all shapes and sizes. In the case of the current exhibit at the Gudelsky Gallery Suite at the Mansion at Strathmore, it's anything smaller than 25 square inches. The 77th annual International Exhibition of Fine Art in Miniature runs through Dec. 30.

Wes Siegrist judged the show's 731 pieces for The Miniature Painters, Sculptors and Gravers Society of Washington D.C. (MPSGS). The miniature artist and historian says three characteristics define miniature art: scale, size and technique. The size of a miniature piece must be small enough that a viewer can pick up and hold it in one hand. The rule for the show at Strathmore is that the face of a painting cannot exceed 25 square inches and the frame cannot be more than 56 square inches.

In terms of scale, Siegrist says the images created on miniature pieces must be reduced considerably from their original sizes. Life-sized images, such as the depiction of a butterfly or insect, do not count as legitimate miniature art. While MPSGS does not follow a particular scale requirement, some standards have been established in the miniature community.

"About 40 years ago, a society in New Jersey developed a particular scale that we now call the 'one-sixth scale.' They arbitrarily, apparently, decided upon this to make it easier for artists submitting to the shows. Everybody was always wanting to know, 'Well how small should I make it?' So they said, 'Well, we're going to say one-sixth,' and that rule or guideline has helped up for over 40 years," Siegrist says.

The last component is technique. For Siegrist, this means the work should not only be appealing from a distance, but also upon closer inspection with a tool like a magnifying glass.

"A miniature painting should have a refined quality about it that does not disappoint you when you look up close," he says.

Siegrist's career in miniatures began in 1996 when he and his wife, Rachele Siegrist, who were both painters of traditional-size works, received an application to the Miniature Arts Society of Florida. After attending the exhibition the following year, the couple saw an opportunity to carve a niche for themselves in the art community. They managed to stand out at local general-art exhibitions by working solely in miniatures.

"Any other artist that was doing miniatures was just doing one or two on the side, whereas when you would walk into the show, we would have 50 to 60 up on display. It really caught people's eyes," Siegrist says.

As primarily wildlife artists, they also distinguished themselves from fellow miniature artists who rarely depicted nature at the time.

"I don't want to say we were an instant success, but within a couple of years, our wildlife miniatures became synonymous with my wife and I," Siegrist says.

Now working mainly in miniatures, each of the Siegrists has earned dozens of awards, and their work is featured in a national museum tour.

Wes Siegrist's reputation as a miniature artist was one reason MPSGS President Narissa Steel asked him to judge the exhibit.

"He's world famous as a miniaturist, and he's hailed as one of the finest living practitioners of the miniature art form. It was a real privilege to have him," she says.

On a weekend visit from their home in Townsend, Tenn., in early October, the Siegrists traveled to MPSGS member Genevieve Roberts' Ashton home. After examining the artwork for the exhibit, which had been laid out in her basement, Siegrist chose Fort Meyers, Fla. artist Charlie Tweed as "Best in Show." Tweed's watercolor depiction of a collection of pumpkins and other vegetables, "Future Jack-O-Lanterns," caught Siegrist's eye.

"The way that he presented it, even with the frame," Siegrist says. "You just wanted to pick it up and examine it. It didn't disappoint you at all when you looked. Even when you grabbed the magnifying glass, you were still impressed and delighted to be looking at that little painting."

Although Siegrist judged 731 pieces of miniature art, all of which are for sale at the exhibit, Steel says 810 submissions came in from around world, including Tasmania, England and South Africa. Steel and a panel of six other MPSGS members judged the submissions. Logistical issues prevented some pieces from being part of the show.

"A lot of the rejects come because they're not framed correctly or the mats may not be cut correctly or they're too large," Steel explains.

Steel has been president of MPSGS, the nation's oldest miniature arts society, for two years; she has been a member since 2001. The former Forestville High School English teacher says this year's show is different from past ones in that the work of miniature sculptor Louis Rosenthal was shown on Nov. 20 and 21. The artwork had not been exhibited in 60 years, and Rosenthal's name holds particular weight for MPSGS members.

"In 1923, The Royal Society of Miniature Painters changed their charter to The Royal Society of Miniature Painters and Sculptors solely to allow in one American: Louis Rosenthal," Steel says.

For those interested in learning more about miniature art and the exhibit, Strathmore will offer educational tours for children and adults on Saturday: 10:15 a.m. for children and 1 p.m. for adults. Strathmore's Fine Arts Program and Education Manager Holly Haliniewski says the tours will cover the history of miniatures as well as techniques used by many of the artists.

"A lot of people are interested in the numbers and the details," Haliniewski says. "How many hours? How many hairs on the brush? How long did it take to do this? Where do you get your special materials? And we cover all that information."

Haliniewski says the annual exhibit is one of Strathmore's most anticipated shows and its success is evident in the number of sales.

"We've already sold 130. and that's in the first week," she says.

For the 77th Annual International Exhibition of Fine Art in Miniature, it's the little things that count.

tforhecz@gazette.net

The 77th Annual International Exhibition of Fine Art in Miniature runs through Dec. 30 at the Gudelsky Gallery Suite at the Mansion at Strathmore, 10701 Rockville Pike, North Bethesda. Call 301-581-5200 or visit www.strathmore.org.