

Life in Miniature: Identity and Display at Ancient Seleucia-on-the-Tigris



Miniature objects have always had a special power to enchant—whether they be tiny models of creatures or replicas of larger entities like buildings. But why have so many people throughout history created these objects, and what do they mean? How do the miniatures made by a particular society reflect the identities and values of its populace?

The Kelsey's current special exhibition, “Life in Miniature: Identity and Display at Ancient Seleucia-on-the-Tigris,” investigates these questions using miniature objects from the ancient Seleucid capital, located just 18 miles south of Baghdad in present-day Iraq. The show is guest curated by Stephanie Langin-Hooper, Assistant Professor of Ancient Art History at Bowling Green State University, along with Kelsey Curator and U-M Classics Professor Sharon Herbert.

Seleucia-on-the-Tigris was established around 312 BC by Seleucus I, founder of the Seleucid empire. The new city became a melting pot for Greek, Macedonian, and Babylonian inhabitants, with additional influences from Persians, West Semitic peoples, and eventually Parthians. The resulting blend of cultures is particularly evident in the hybrid styles and manufacturing techniques of the miniature objects in this installation. Because their small scale encourages close interaction with people, such objects represent an especially intimate expression of this complex social world.

Visitors to the exhibition may experience the delight of interacting with these miniatures through a series of nine digital animations, accessible on iPads in the gallery. In these animations, digital reconstructions of several exhibited objects will move in the same way(s) that they did for their original owners approximately 2,000 years ago.

A display of modern-day miniatures, such as dolls and collectibles, bridges the gap between past and present, encouraging visitors to reflect on how our own society also creates a “life in miniature.” Additionally, a photographic collage juxtaposes images of people holding their own contemporary miniatures (things like Christmas ornaments, refrigerator magnets, wedding-cake toppers) with photos of Kelsey staffers holding the ancient artifacts.

Please join us from December 20, 2013 to March 16, 2014, to explore the fascination of “Life in Miniature.”

Associated Events

January 24, 2014, 6 pm: Grand opening and lecture by Stephanie Langin-Hooper, "Miniatures in Life: The Role of Tiny Objects in Everyday Worlds"

February 21, 2014, 6 pm, lecture, "The Power of the Miniature: Small Things with Big Consequences," by Douglass Bailey, Chair of Anthropology, San Francisco State University

March 13, 2014, 6 pm, lecture, "Seleucia-on-the-Tigris: Past and Present," by Sharon Herbert and Jenny Kreiger, graduate student in the U-M Interdepartmental Program in Classical Art and Archaeology

April 12, 1–3 pm, Family Day exploring exhibition themes, with hands-on family activities