Little House In the Museum

By Chloe Nehme

In the twentieth century, dollhouses are a quaint reminder of childhood. Whether you or your siblings made up stories about the dolls living inside them, or simply used the house as a backdrop for other games, the dollhouse was a prevalent symbol of playtime in this era. The early origins of dollhouses however indicate they were not designed to be used as a child's toy. The Boylston Historical Society Museum among its current exhibition, highlights a dollhouse crafted by Boylstonian Robert H. Haddon. The Haddon dollhouse provides an unassuming gateway to a larger history.

COLONIAL NEW ENGLAND DOLLHOUSE *(front view)*
Designed and Built by Robert H. Haddon
Boylston Historical Society Museum Collections

The Ptolemaic Period

What can be first classified as 'dollhouses' date back to Ancient Egyptian tombs. The Ancient Egyptians viewed the afterlife as a continuation of one's own life. As such, their tombs were filled with objects that the person was meant to bring along with them. Some of these objects were *Shabtis*; little wooden figurines meant to join the person in the afterlife. These little figurines would be responsible as servants for the person in exchange for being granted life from an inanimate form.[1] These were in use from around 2000 BC until 31 BC, with the end of the Ptolemaic period with the fall of Cleopatra to the Romans.[2] These miniature dolls would be equipped with domestic articles and miniature abodes that they would reside in and use during the afterlife. While vastly different than how we classify dolls and dollhouses today, they are the first related historical example.

Cabinet Houses

DOLL'S HOUSE FROM PETRONELL DE LA COURT AMSTERDAM, NETHERLANDS
1670-1690
Wikipedia Commons Photograph

While children throughout history have played with dolls, the first modern dollhouses would be in the late 1500s. Privy to wealthy Northern Europeans, these were exclusively for adults to show off their miniature possessions in a pretty little home. Known as 'baby houses', these showcased a lady's refined taste and wealthiness with exotic materials and metals.[3] The earliest known baby house was commissioned from 1557-1558 by Duke Albrecht V of Bavaria.[4] Germans would call them a *dockenhaus*, or miniature house, while Hollanders would have a specific "cabinet house", because that's what they were– the cabinet shelves would house the different rooms that were shown off. At this time, the most that children could interact with dollhouses were through Nuremberg Kitchens– Girls would learn how to manage a household through these. In 1700s England, baby houses had become incredibly popular ways to replicate the live-sized house.[5]

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[1] The Dollhouse: Shabtis in Tutankhamun's Tomb | Animus: The University of Chicago's Undergraduate Journal for the Classics
[2] The Materiality of Shabtis: Figurines over a Millenia, pg 125, Kathryn Howley
[3] Dollhouse - The Strong National Museum of Play
[4] "Playing with Size and Reality: The Fascination of a Dolls' House World". *Children's Literature in Education*, pg 46, Nancy Chen
[5] A History of Dollhouses

Industrial Revolution Impact

Each of these baby houses were uniquely crafted and commissioned. It wasn't until the Industrial Revolution that dollhouses would be mass-produced with the advent of new technology and cheaper materials. Until World War I, Germany prided itself on the most exquisite dollhouses and miniatures. They were produced in "toy city", or Nuremburg, Germany and exported around Europe and to North America.[6]

As Germany was recovering from the first World War I, dollhouses began to be majorly produced locally within the United States. After World War II, they became even more mass-produced and accessible to the middle class with the introduction of materials like plastic. They were made more durable and interactive with movable doors, drawers and other furniture. By the 1960s, the dollhouse boomed in popularity with even more accessible transportation and distribution, leading to the modern era of toy dollhouses such as PlayMobile and the Barbie Dreamhouse.[7] Nowadays, doll houses are enjoyed by both child and adult alike. Children play with them, and the hobby of collecting vintage dollhouses has since emerged.

Boylston Craftsman

The dollhouse currently on display was crafted by Robert Horton Haddon. Robert was born on 28 April 1907 to parents John M. Haddon and Polly Ida *Bradford* Haddon.[8] On 7 July 1928, Robert married Jessie Mae Sanders.[9] The couple had three children: May Violet Haddon, Robert Douglas and Sandra. May, their first, was born 17 December 1929, but unfortunately passed away in infancy on 3 May 1930.[10] Robert Douglas was born 27 September 1931 and passed on 11 March 2022 and Sandra was born 16 September 1938.[11,12]

Robert Horton Haddon was a member of the Army Corps of Engineers. The Corps was originally found in 1775 during the American Revolution with George Washington appointing the first engineers. It plans, builds and maintains major public works and military construction and serves as part of the National Response framework in a natural disaster and oversees environmental regulatory work. Serving as a carpenter, he gained the construction skills to design and build the scaled dollhouse with an operational door.[13] By the 1970s, Robert and his family were living in Boylston, on 12 Midland Road. After 60 years of marriage, Robert passed away on 13 July 1988 and his wife passed on 2006; both were interred in Pine Grove Cemetery[14,15]

New England Colonial Dollhouse *(backside)*
Depicting 6 Rooms and Center Staircase
Designed and Built by Robert Haddon
Boylston Historical Society Museum Collections

The 20th century 2 story dollhouse resembles a Colonial New England House. It features authentic architectural details such as period accurate windows, clapboards, four large rooms, two small rooms with a center staircase as well as two fireplaces and a movable front door. Each room has high quality characteristic wood flooring and windowsills. This 3-dimensional dollhouse is an excellent piece of craftsmanship that exemplifies heirloom-quality dollhouses of the 20th century.

Dollhouses originally meant only for adults and tombs have been given new life by children and collectors alike. Now, they are lively reminders that no matter what, we will always have an inner child to keep happy.

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[6] The collector's history of dolls' houses, doll's house dolls, and miniatures. New York: St. Martin's Press. pp. 27–28, Constance Eileen King
[7] The History of the Dollhouse – House to Home
[8] Findagrave Memorial, Robert Horton Haddon, Pine Grove Cemetery
[9] Marriage Record: Lake. Marriage Records Feb 17, 1928–Aug 16, 1928
[10] Illinois, Deaths and Stillbirths, 1916-1948
[11] United States, Obituary Records, 2014-2023
[12] Cook County, Illinois, United States Census, 1950
[13] Coffee County, Tennessee, United States, Census, 1950
[14] Boylston Births/Marriage/Deaths 1986-1992, pg 24, Boylston Historical Society Inc.
[15] Find A Grave Memorial, Jessie Mae Sanders Horton, Pine Grove Cemetery

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