



SALON 94

ART SY

## Peek inside the Intricate Worlds of Art History's Most Spectacular Dollhouses

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*Sara Rothe's Dollhouse*, Courtesy of Gemeentemuseum Den Haag.

The Barbie Dreamhouse may have set the contemporary template for dollhouses: mass-produced plastic toys crafted for children not just to play with, but to spit on, break, and quickly get bored with. But it hasn't always been this way.

Traditionally, dollhouses have served various purposes that have had little to do with innocent amusement: They were works of art in their own right. In the 17th and 18th centuries, particularly in northern Europe, wealthy households constructed splendid dollhouses as *wunderkammer* to entertain and delight visitors—and to exercise their excellent taste. By the same token, these luxurious display cabinets were didactic tools, used to teach little girls the domestic skills they would need to run their households as adult wives.

One of the most famous—and perfectly preserved—examples from this time period lives at the [Rijksmuseum](#) in Amsterdam. Open the hinged doors of Petronella Oortman’s exceptionally realistic dollhouse (ca. 1686–1710) to enter a world of almost unimaginable luxury. The tortoiseshell structure, inlaid with precious materials, is so precise and so precious that it couldn’t possibly have been for playtime. Oortman, the wife of a Dutch merchant, must have spent hours amusing her guests with the real, silk-upholstered furniture or tiny porcelain dishes displayed in finely rendered wooden display cases.



Anonymous, *Dolls' house of Petronella Oortman*, c. 1686–1710. Courtesy of Rijksmuseum.

In the 18th century it was a popular—and gallingly self-congratulatory—custom among the well-to-do to commission exact miniature replicas of their own homes for display. Dolls intended for children to actually play with were introduced to dollhouses in the 19th century; it wasn’t until the 1930s that dollhouses began to be mass-produced for mainstream use by children. There’s an unexplainable—yet undeniable—satisfaction in seeing familiar things in smaller scale. It is the crucial element of voyeurism, however, that truly exhilarates the dolls’ house—one has the ability to play god, master of a small universe.

In the 21st century, dollhouses have become their own very serious cottage industry. Dollhouse and miniature museums dot the United States, not to mention many toy museums and kid-friendly attractions, like the Times Square favorite, Gulliver’s Gate. Contemporary artists have also become fascinated with the potentials of dollhouses, using them to explore identity, class, and social mores, or to showcase collections of miniature masterpieces.

Below, we take a tour through seven dollhouses that show just how elaborate and artistic they can be.

## Laurie Simmons, *Kaleidoscope House* (2001)



Laurie Simmons, *Kaleidoscope House*, 2001. Courtesy of the artist and Salon 94.

At the dawn of the new millennium, Laurie Simmons was already well known for her photographs of dramatic tableaux set within dollhouses. In 2001, collaborating with architect Peter Wheelwright, she designed a futuristic dollhouse available to everyone ages six and up. “*The Kaleidoscope House* came out of our shared interests in domesticity and in particular the changing practices of home and family,” Simmons and Wheelwright wrote in the toy catalogue for their project, distributed in a limited edition by Bozart Toys. “Clearly, there is a need for a new dollhouse in the family playroom.”

Although improbably made from neon Plexiglas screens that slide open and closed, Simmons and Wheelwright wanted the house to reflect the “kaleidoscopic” range of 21st-century families. To that end, the open and mutable interior spaces could be combined for working and living, benefiting all kinds of familial arrangements. Aside from this utopic, egalitarian vision, the *Kaleidoscope House* was canny and pragmatic, geared more towards collectors than children. The house came sans furnishings or accessories, except for a doll family modeled on Simmons, her daughter Grace, Wheelwright, and his son Matt (Laurie’s other daughter Lena and friends were available in sets sold separately). The designer living and dining room sets, not to mention the pool furniture, also came at an additional cost.

Particularly enticing catalogue add-ons were artworks by members of Simmons’s real life art circle: her husband Carroll Dunham, along with Sarah Charlesworth, Barbara Kruger, Peter Halley, and Cindy Sherman, among others. But one work above all is a must-have for any serious collector. Simmons contributed one of her own photographs to the house, an early work typical of her practice. The darkly playful image is shot in a constructed dollhouse set and explores the often complex realities of women’s domestic lives. Not one to let a good dollhouse go unphotographed, Simmons later staged such isolating, glamorous scenes in her series “*The Kaleidoscope House*” (2000–02).