

Reflections on dolls' houses

Originally created as luxury items for wealthy adults, early examples of dolls' houses originated in Northern Europe in the sixteenth century. One of the first known commissions of a dolls' house was a miniature royal residence, created for Duke Albrecht V of Bavaria in 1557–58 (Mack, 2007:146). While the early dolls' houses were intended primarily for a male adult audience, by the seventeenth century, dolls' houses became viewed as principally intended for women. Dolls' houses for children became increasingly common by the early eighteenth century, and by around 1820 children became the primary intended consumer (Chen, 2015). While dolls' houses for adults were a display of wealth articulated through high-quality craftsmanship, dolls' houses for children centred around a didactic focus on home life, promoting 'family values and domestic virtues' (Chen, 2015:279).

In these early examples, tension between adult and child audiences for dolls' houses is apparent (Armstrong, 1996). From Victorian times, dolls' houses became a common feature of the child's toy collection; references to them can be seen in numerous examples of children's literature from this period. Nancy Chen explores the relationship between children's toys and books, playing and reading in the context of dolls' houses and their depictions in children's literature from Victorian and Edwardian times (Chen, 2014, 2015).

The role of creativity and imagination in playing with a dolls' house has also been argued. This can be seen both through the creation and control of a microcosm within a dolls' house, but also through the process of making toys and decorations for dolls' houses. This became an interesting aspect of the exhibition, as visitors rearranged the objects placed in the rooms to create their own narratives.