

They are truly tiny miracles: prayer beads, altarpieces, rosaries, statuettes and other miniature sculptures, intricately carved from boxwood in the early 1500s. These artworks at micro-scale depicting biblical scenes were made as sophisticated 'toys' for private devotion and amusement, as well as collectibles that only the rich could afford. Their makers deployed clever strategies to fashion objects of breathtaking craftsmanship and artistry. Ingeniously constructed, some even feature little hatches that give access to hidden scenes.

One cannot help but wonder how these virtuoso carvings could have possibly been made. This publication investigates the patrons who ordered these little marvels, explains where and how they were made and used, and presents no less than eighty of them in all their glory.

SMALL WONDERS

**LATE-
GOTHIC
BOXWOOD
MICRO-
CARVINGS
FROM
THE LOW
COUNTRIES**

EDITED BY FRITS SCHOLTEN

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LATE-GOTHIC BOXWOOD MICRO-CARVINGS FROM THE LOW COUNTRIES

EDITED BY FRITS SCHOLTEN

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Art can amaze and inspire, and that is particularly true of miniature art. Just like the awesome scale of a Gothic cathedral, the microscopically small also makes us wonder about its unimaginable size: how could something so tiny have been made by human hands? People have been captivated for centuries by the Gothic micro-carvings created in the Low Countries in the late 15th and early 16th centuries. These miniature altarpieces or prayer beads were initially admired for the religious visions that unfolded upon opening them, but there was soon equal fascination with their artistry and craftsmanship. These objects became fashionable and found their way into some of the most important collections of the period. Perhaps possession of the world in miniature reinforced the collectors' sense of power and status in the real world?

Today, most of these boxwood miniatures are in museums the world over, three of which have joined forces to share this remarkable art with the public: the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto, The Met Cloisters in New York, and the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. The result is *Small Wonders*, an exhibition that will travel to each museum, as well as a website with high-quality photographs of these micro-carvings, and this book designed by Irma Boom.

Small Wonders offers many new insights into the making of these marvellous works of art and their use for both prayer and play. It also contributes to our knowledge of the maker Adam Dircksz, including

his origins in Holland (not Flanders). Dircksz remains an enigma, after his initial discovery in 1968 by Jaap Leeuwenberg, former curator of sculpture in the Rijksmuseum. Leeuwenberg's pioneering work and that of Susan Jean Romanelli, a former Met curator, whose 1992 dissertation was devoted to micro-carving, jointly blazed the trail for the outstanding research conducted by the authors of this book. We are deeply grateful for their contributions.

Our thanks, too, go to all the staff members at the three museums who have been involved in this project and to the many museums and private individuals who made their precious works of art available to us. Finally, we are indebted to the sponsors who made *Small Wonders* into such a wonder: the family of the late Ken Thomson in Toronto, the Michel David-Weill Fund in New York, and the Pot Family Foundation/Rijksmuseum Fonds in Amsterdam.

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