

MIGHTY MINIATURES

Aesthetically delightful and charmingly enigmatic, miniature furniture has it all in a small but perfectly formed package, explains Kate MacDougall

STYLING JAINE BEVAN
PHOTOGRAPHS PHILIP SOWELS





Stashed in the back of a furniture workshop in the long shadows of St Paul's Cathedral, a young cabinetmaker finishes the inlay on a bureau, his final piece before he completes his apprenticeship. A mile away, in a Bloomsbury townhouse, a baroness admires an exquisite mahogany chest that she's just been given for her birthday.

We are in London, in the middle of the 18th century and, while these two Georgian figures are poles apart in class and lineage, what they have in common is that they both cradle miniature furniture in their hands.

Besides the meticulous craftsmanship, one of the considerable appeals of miniature furniture is that there is an element of mystery to it. ▶

PREVIOUS PAGE Wall painted in Arsenic, £46.50 for 2.5l, *Farrow & Ball*. Mid-20th-century French **side table** from the Hotel Ritz in Paris, £1,950 for a pair, *Brownrigg Drax*. **Desk light**, £130, *Pooky*. **Miniature vernacular armchair** with rush seat c1830, £550, *Robert Young Antiques*. Round **jute rug**, £39.99, *H&M*. **Books**, stylist's own. 19th-century French rush seated **Provençal armchair** c1840, £1,100, *Lorforde*. Yellow velvet **cushion**, £14.99, *Homesense*.

THIS PAGE Wall painted as before. Bullion Gold **sideboard**, £795, *Graham & Green*. Sigward of London **fusee dial clock**, £735, *Kembery Antique Clocks*. Bloomingville yellow and white **pattered pot**, £10.50, *Mon Pote*. **Small plant pot**, £9.99, *Cotswold Trading*. **Plants**, stylist's own. Edwardian **miniature longcase clock** c1910, £275, *Kembery Antique Clocks*.



Wall painted as before. White Stash **desk**, £439, *Heal's*. Georgian mahogany **model bureau**, £2,950, *Graham Smith Antiques*. On bureau: George IV **terrestrial globe** c1820, £2,500 for a pair, *Georgian Antiques*; **yellow paperweight**, £20, *Rachel's & Michael's Antiques*; **blue and green paperweight**, £12, *Focus on the Past*. **Paperweights**, £20 each, *Rachel's & Michael's Antiques*. **Books**, stylist's own. On books: **yellow 1960s clock**, £35, *Cream & Chrome*; Tibaldi model 60 piston filler **fountain pen** made in Italy, £550, *Vintage and Modern Pens*. **Green and black pen** made in Germany, £350, *Vintage and Modern Pens*. 1960s West German **ceramic plant pot**, £10, *Pineapple Retro*. **Plant**, stylist's own. Yellow Zenit **cup and saucer** by Upsala-Ekeby, £18, *Coco Collectables*. Carnaby **footstool** in Mustard Yellow velvet, £99, *Atkin and Thyme*. On shelf: antique **miniature mahogany bureau**, £775; antique walnut **miniature pedestal desk**, £1,250, both *Richard Gardner Antiques*; **mannequin**, £525 for seven, *Lorforde*.



Although antiques dealers and historians can make educated assumptions as to the main function of these beautiful pieces, there is still a bit of guesswork involved.

While some believe that smaller versions were made for travelling salesmen to show off makers' wares to potential buyers, others prefer to see them as purely decorative, or the work of apprentices in training. Lack of transport could have made the movement of heavy sample pieces logistically complex, although it is entirely likely that cabinetmakers displayed miniature versions in their shop windows. What could be more appealing to a potential customer than being able to see and touch a pocket-sized version of the furniture they were going to order?

What we do know is that the Georgians were supremely interested in anything with a childlike slant – a reflection of the art, literature and philosophy of the day, and once we reach the Victorian era, when the ▶

LEFT USM Haller **sideboard** with top shelving and drop down doors, **£1,673**, *USM Modular Furniture*. Small mid-century 'Flower' **ceramic planter**, **£25**, *Mustard Vintage*. **Plant**, stylist's own. **Books**, from **£5** each, *Bookbarn International*. **Miniature Wassily chair**, **£205**; **miniature Wishbone chair**, **£285**; **miniature Eames Lounge chair and ottoman**, **£539**, all *The Conran Shop*. Architectural model of **library steps** c1920s, **£1,200**, *Brownrigg*. **Miniature walnut serpentine chest of drawers** c1920, **£345**; **miniature oak chest of drawers** c1860, **£435**, both *Shaun King Antiques*. **George III miniature chest of drawers**, **£780**; **miniature chest of drawers** c1860, **£640**, both *Thakeham Furniture*.



LEFT Wall painted in Amalfi Lemon, £23 per litre, *Designers Guild*. Hubsch White with Black Lines rug, £87.50, *Mon Pote*. Ariella Chevron large bedside table, £355, *Graham & Green*. 20th-century miniature chinoiserie collectors' cabinet, £325, *Lorfor*s. Dark turquoise ceramic plant pot, £14.99, *H&M*. Fern, stylist's own. Green glass beads, £7; yellow beads, £6.50, both *Focus on the Past*. Bow Tie wall light in Black, £80, *Pooky*. Palm Trees cup, £6.99, *H&M*. Mid-century West German ceramic vase, £19, *Mustard Vintage*. Fern, stylist's own. Elegant all-brass Edwardian single bed, £1,650 for a pair, *Bedsteads*. Alisha Floral Yellow reversible single duvet cover and pillowcase set, £12; Evan Teal throw, £10, both *Dunelm*. Cushion, £14.99, *Homesense*.

love of sentimentality peaked, the market for miniatures was positively booming. 'The 18th-century elite started the fascination with objects being scaled down,' says David Macdonald, Senior Director of Furniture at Sotheby's in London. 'Small furniture was not designed for children, and these miniature pieces were curios for adults, commissioned and collected by the well-to-do to

display in their homes. It was a sign of wealth and refinement.' One of the most significant commissions of this type was Queen Mary's famous Lutyens-designed dolls' house, belonging to the Royal Collection Trust and now residing at Windsor Castle. Built between 1921 and 1924, it includes pieces made by over 1,500 of the 20th century's finest craftsmen and artists. ▶

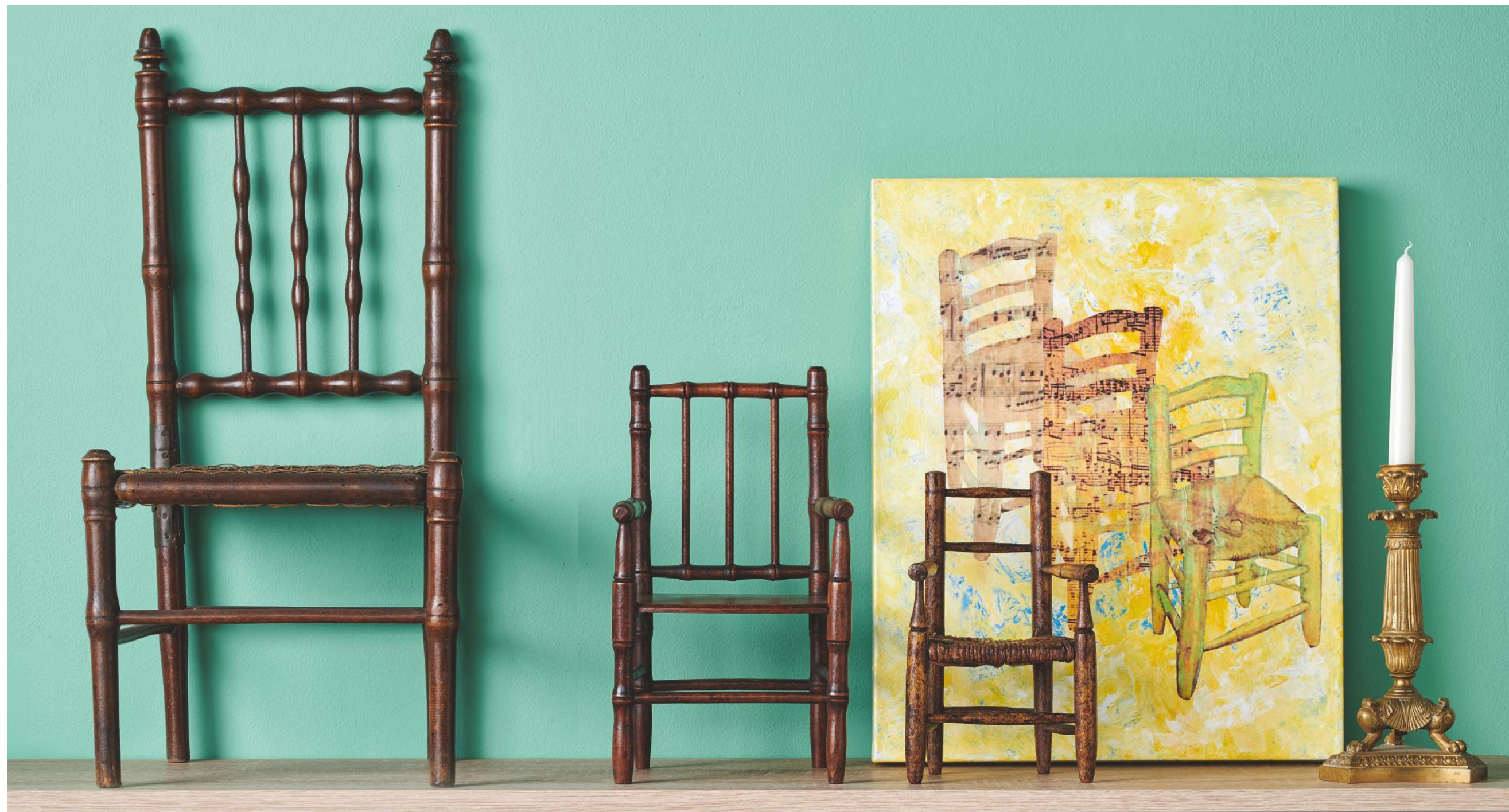


RIGHT Wall painted as before. 19th-century inlay Italian pedestal table, £950, *Lorfor*s. Livslång vase, £6, *Ikea*. 1930s miniature monks' bench, £250, *Georgian Antiques*. Miniature inlaid walnut apprentice piece table c1840, £385, *Shaun King Antiques*. 1970s miniature games table, £90, *Georgian Antiques*. Miniature writing desk c1880, £220, *Robert Young Antiques*. 1970s miniature Orkney chair, £200, *Georgian Antiques*. Dempsey Teal curtain, £21.25, *Dunelm*.

In terms of other diminutive items available on the market today, it is far harder to give them a provenance or even a purpose. 'We know that apprentices did work on pieces to complete their tenure with a cabinetmaker and allow them to join a guild', continues David. 'But, it is not always possible to tell whether a piece was made by the apprentice or the master and if it was a client commission.'

The quality of the materials can sometimes indicate whether a piece was a sample or a commission, but what all of these miniatures share is their painstaking attention to detail and artistry. Working in such reduced sizes meant craftsmen had to be particularly refined, and while many of these pieces were simply for show, some could also be functional, for example bureaus to store jewellery or mini pianos that opened to reveal a workbox. 'These are art objects in their own right,' says David. 'And still attract much interest at sale.'

The advent of mass-produced furniture in the Victorian age means there are more examples from this period up for grabs, with prices ranging from £200-£1,000. The finer 18th-century examples can go for over £3,000, but as with all old objects, you're buying the chance to hold history in your hands. ■



RIGHT Wall painted in Arsenic, £46.50 for 2.5l, Farrow & Ball. 19th-century child's chair, £240, Lorfords. Miniature spindle back armchair c1830, £450; miniature vernacular armchair with rush seat c1830, £550, both Robert Young Antiques. Musical Chairs collage by John Pimlott, £155, Artfinder. Candlestick with lion feet, £560 for a pair; 19th-century French rush seat Provençal armchair c1840, £1,100, both Lorfords.

