

FOUR ESSAYS BY PETER THOMAS

The History of Miniature Books

A miniature book is nothing more than a book that is miniature in size. Of course, there is more to the story than that...

Some consider Sumerian clay tablets, with cuneiform writing, to be the first miniature books. These were made as early as 2500 BCE. Others would claim the first miniature books were made in the Middle Ages by the scribes who created the grand hand-written, illuminated and illustrated devotionals, bibles and other manuscript books, like the Book of Kells, as they also made a number of those books in a miniature format. The question of which was the first “miniature” sized incunabula, or early printed book, would probably bring the answer: the “Officium”, or Book of Hours, printed by Nicholas Jenson in Venice, 1474 (Hain 11895). Its page dimensions are about 3 1/8 by 2 1/8 inches and the type area is only 2 x 1 1/4 inches. At that time there was no “standard” for the size of a miniature book. If a book fit in a pocket, or if it would be lost when shelved with normal-sized books it was considered a miniature. In the mid-twentieth century the common limitation became 3 inches, but there was no agreement on whether that meant 3 inches of printing in the book, three inches of page height, or a binding that was a maximum of three inches. When the Miniature Book Society was founded in 1983 they defined a miniature book to be one that is no more than three inches in size - height, width or thickness. Of course even that definition is not universally accepted. Outside the United States, where other measuring systems are used, books of up to four inches are often collected as miniature books.

To confuse things even more, miniature books are usually thought to come in four different size categories, regular miniature books, dollhouse miniature books, oversized miniature books and micro-miniature books. Regular miniature books conform to the three-inch limitation. Dollhouse size book are made on an inch-to-foot scale, so a regular size dollhouse book is about three-quarters of an inch tall. Oversized miniature books are just a bit too big to be regular, but still seem like they ought to be called a miniature book, like all those four-inch “Little Leather Library” books. Micro-miniature books get as small as possible. For years the Guinness Book of World Records listed the Gleniffer Press’s 1986 edition of *Old King Cole*, which measures one millimeter square, as the record holder. (As a point of interest, they defined a book as a series of at least 7 pages connected at a spine). That book was printed on an early laser printer and the pages were glued together at the spine. (As another aside, Ian Macdonald, who made that book once challenged me to try to beat his record. “It is not that hard,” he said to me, “you just have to find a text that only has three- or four-letter words, or else your whole book will have to be hyphenated!”)

Our First Miniature Book

I started my career making books in the late fifteenth century, working at the Renaissance Pleasure Faire in Agoura, California. I continued by studying fine printing with William Everson (aka Brother Antoninus) at the University of California Santa Cruz, Lime Kiln Press. In 1980 my wife Donna and I made a small book *Yotan’s Vision* from scraps of English handmade paper salvaged from the Lime Kiln Press’s *Granite and Cypress*. In accordance with fine-press tradition I had designed it to have golden section proportions with wide margins and deckle-edged paper. I showed it to Los Angeles bookseller Muir Dawson who I had met through our mutual interest in papermaking and by the coincidence that his son was in my graduating class at UCSC. He did not express much interest but said, “You should show that to my brother, he likes that sort of thing.” Without much hope I showed it to Glen Dawson. He took a quick look, pulled a ruler out of his pocket,

measured the book and said, “If it was only a quarter of an inch shorter I would have bought twenty. There are folks that collect miniature books, but they won’t buy one if it is over three inches.” Back home, we trimmed the pages, cutting off the deckle edges and ruining my perfect proportions and then sold him twenty books. That’s how we started making miniature books.

Why Make Miniature Books?

People love small things. When you hold a miniature book in your hand, it is like holding a jewel. Although some need magnification to be read, most can be enjoyed with the naked eye. They are indeed like jewelry, with words and images instead of gemstones and wonderful structures instead of precious metals. Cradling a miniature book in your hands is a delight compared to lugging a ten-pound textbook around.

Miniature books are generally easier to make than larger books. It is cheaper to acquire small-sized materials. The materials can generally be of a lighter weight than required by a big book and so they are easier to cut. Gluing up the materials is easier as there is less surface area to cover. Miniature books generally do not warp when drying, so you do not need a press, which is a heavy and expensive (but for large books, necessary) piece of equipment. Only two things might be harder about making miniature books. They require the use of little measurements, like the thirty-seconds scale on a ruler, which will be a challenge for some people and the binder must have excellent manual dexterity to work with the tiny measurements and materials.

Miniature books can be very inexpensive to make. The materials can be scraps like mat board and paper cut-offs from other projects. You can use portions of old drawings and paintings for your covers or endpages. If you have tried to make your own marbled paper, but it always came out flawed, you will find there is always a perfect part large enough to make an incredibly beautiful miniature book.

Text for miniature books can be found in the full range of human endeavor in literature, theology, politics, art, leisure activities, children's stories, and any other subject you can think of. Miniature books are the perfect literary vehicles when you have very little text. A favorite saying, a thought, a poem, a fragment of a dream can be made into a book and since the text is short and the object small, your book can be completed in a day or a week, rather than the months or years a larger book would require.

How Do You Learn to Make a Miniature Book?

The same techniques that are used to make a large book are also used to make a miniature book. Everything learned in any bookmaking classes can be applied to making a miniature book. The advantage to taking a class like ours, which focuses on the miniature book, is that we will share the big and little tricks and techniques we have discovered during our many years of making miniature books. Those tips can help to save you some time and grief.

In the beginning, at the Renaissance Faire, our goal was to learn how to make paper and bind books as they did in the sixteenth century. We made a few blank books and they sold immediately so we made more, and more and more. I don’t know how I actually learned anything. I read books, talked to people who knew something about the craft, but mostly I just learned by doing, prodded on by the childhood memory of my neighbor saying again and again, “If you are going to do something, do it right.” An old bookbinder once stopped by our booth at the Faire. He looked at our books and said, “You can’t buy experience.” I still don’t know if that was a complement or a slight, but it was the truth.