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## It's just so TINY

'Exquisite Miniatures' fills the spotlight at Bonita arts center

BY NANCY STETSON

[nstetson@floridaweekly.com](mailto:nstetson@floridaweekly.com)



Looking like Sherlock Holmes wannabes searching for clues, visitors to the Centers for the Arts Bonita Springs hold up magnifying glasses to the paintings in "Exquisite Miniatures," the exhibition on display through April 29.

The creations of husband-and-wife Wes and Rachelle Siegrist, most of the paintings are slightly bigger than a driver's license, and all of them are definitely much smaller than a breadbox. Some are the size of a large stamp, and there are some circular ones the size of a quarter.

Gallery visitors are afforded magnifying glasses to inspect the works.

"Miniatures should reward you for close inspection," says Mr. Siegrist. "Most artwork, you appreciate from across the room and then from three feet away. You generally don't get that close to a painting."

But miniatures are different, he adds. "They draw you in. You get close and closer, and if they're done properly ... you're not disappointed."

Not counting the "Exquisite Miniatures" show, the couple, has exhibited in front of more than 50,000 people.

And typically, Mr. Siegrist says, they'll hear two reactions.

A person will turn around and say to the artists, "I was not expecting this to look this good!" Or, they grab a person nearby and say, "Look at this! You're not going to believe all the detail that's in there."

At the Bonita exhibition, the general reaction to the exhibit has been "a lot of excitement and awe," says Ehren Gerhard, director of art exhibitions for the center. "You could blow up any of them to a large-scale

format and they'd hold up really well," he says. "It's a feat of grandeur or astonishment in the capability of what they can capture in such a small space.



"Lonestar Longhorn," Wes Siegrist

"There's a lot of disbelief: 'Whoa, no way.' People shaking their heads saying, 'I can't believe it.'



"Say it with Flowers," Wes Siegrist

Questions about how the paintings were made."

The works don't look the way you might expect a watercolor would, with washes and transparency.

"These look real," says Mr. Gerhard. "They have a real physicality to them. For such small paintings, they look very solid. It's something that holds up really well."

The Siegrists specialize in wildlife imagery, but the exhibit also contains still lifes, landscapes and cityscapes. One even shows a person looking at paintings in a museum.

Landscapes vary from sequoias in California to the Smokey Mountains, which the artists see everyday from the foothills where they live, in Townsend, Tenn.

How it started

The Siegrists stumbled upon the world of miniature art back in the late 1990s, while living in Okeechobee and working as conventional-scale artists. They were looking to expand their business, but they wanted to be able to ship more of their paintings instead of drive them around from art festival to art festival.

So they started thinking small.

But small to them meant paintings 9-by-12 inches, or perhaps 16-by-20 inches.

By serendipity, they received an application to the Miniature Art Society of Florida.



"At the Dentist," Rachelle and Wes Siegrist

"Initially looking over the rules and guidelines, we thought they were so stringent, that in our minds, we said it was ridiculous," Mr. Siegrist says. They tossed the application to the side, but didn't throw it away.

"A week or so later, I had some time on my hands and decided I was going to do one of those tiny little paintings," he says. "We'd been working in that size, but not in the scale, and not in that refined technique. We had been doing songbirds and flowers and butterflies and bees, but we were painting them life-sized or larger."

He learned that miniature art has three components: They're small sized, they're on a small scale and they have a refined technique.

The scale for images in a miniature in the U.S. is typically one-sixth of life-size or less.

"It's easier to paint an elephant, harder to do a hummingbird," he explains, adding, "they call them guidelines, not rules, so there's some flexibility in all this."

The refined technique means a meticulous attention to detail. Or, as Mr. Siegrist puts it, "You don't want people to be disappointed when they pick up a magnifying glass to look."

His first miniature painting was of a burrowing owl that lived in their side yard.

His wife's reaction upon seeing it was, "That's just so cute!" The next morning, she tried her hand at miniature painting. She did a portrait of her brother, then one of her grandfather.

Initially, the couple didn't use magnifying glasses while painting.

"We were young enough that we could see," he jokes, noting that he was in his 30s and Rachelle in her 20s.

"As we got older, we started wearing reading glasses and picking up magnifying glasses (while doing our paintings)," he says. Mr. Siegrist is 51, his wife is 46. The two have been married for 27 years, and dated for one.

Their friends call them the Siamese twins, because they do everything together and share the same hobbies and interests.

"In our 28 years, the longest we've been apart is 10 hours, when I was in a board meeting with the Society of Animal Artists," he says.

They paint in their 10-by-10 studio, sitting 18 inches apart at the same table (one they built). They each usually work on their own painting, though on occasion they work together on the same one.

Most of their work is on watercolor board, but some are on ivorine, a synthetic ivory developed in the 1890s.

Early history

"Historically, miniature art came from the portrait tradition, before it was supplanted by photography," Mr. Siegrist says, explaining that women would wear locket with images of loved ones while gentlemen carried miniatures in their pockets or wore them as a watch locket.

"They were made to be held very close and intimately examined," he says. "Generally, anywhere today where there's a need for photographs, that would've been a miniature painting," he says, calling it a lucrative, ubiquitous business.

"Some of the first artists to travel to America in the 1600s were miniature artists," he says. "In the Revolutionary War, they carried miniature portraits, or portrait miniatures — the two terms were used interchangeably."

By the time of the Civil War, people carried photographs of loved ones.

Photography decimated what had been an extremely lucrative art form, and artists had to adapt to survive. Many began working in photography studios where they colored and tinted the photographs. They became upset, however, when people began calling the colored photographs miniatures.

"They were painted-over photographs," Mr. Siegrist says. "So the artists founded the very first miniature societies, to define what was a miniature versus a painted-over photograph."

The first society was founded in England in 1896, he says; in 1899, the first society was formed in the U.S.

"Rachelle and I are two living proponents and living members of those societies trying to carry on those traditions," he says. "It's like working jigsaw puzzles. You zone into it, and you become part of that tiny little world."

The couple belong to the Miniature Artists of America; the Miniature Art Society of Florida; the Miniature Painters, Sculptors & Gravers Society of Washington, D.C.; the Cider Painters of America and the Hilliard Society of England. And they are the authors of the world's first standard definition of miniature art adopted by the Association of Miniaturist Artists.

Steady and patient

The key to creating miniature paintings is having patience, Mr. Siegrist says. And secondly, a steady hand.

"If we've had too much caffeine, (we can't paint)," he says. "Your hand has to be rock solid.

"When you start some paintings, you know it's going to take a long time. We want viewers to be impressed. We want the painting to look like it took forever."

His wife tends to be more patient and more meticulous, he says.

Their brushes hold minute amounts of paint. The biggest can hold enough paint to last for a few minutes at a time without reloading.

"It's almost like a needle," Mr. Siegrist says.

The tiniest of them has maybe a dozen hairs on them.

"If you hold a brush out in front of you, you can't see the end of the brush on the tiniest one," he says.

"Sometimes, if we're at a show, we tease and tell kids we paint with gnat eyelashes." |

'Exquisite Miniatures'

>> What: A traveling museum exhibition of miniature paintings by Wes and Rachelle Siegrist

>> Where: Centers for the Arts Bonita Springs/ Center for Visual Arts, 26100 Old 41 Road

>> When: Through April 29

>> Hours: 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday-Saturday

>> Admission: Free

>> Info: 495-8989 or [www.artcenterbonita.org](http://www.artcenterbonita.org)

— "Exquisite Miniatures: A Traveling Museum Exhibition of Miniature Paintings by Wes and Rachelle Siegrist" is produced by David J. Wagner LLC, with company president David Wagner, Ph. D., serving as curator/ tour director.

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