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Miniature Books: A Tiny Obsession

books by
Ruth Downes
of The Sea Ranch, CA

Artist Statement

To me, there is simply something magical about tiny books. When I look at my mini library, or add to it, I experience the illusion of a sacred space, a rarefied and refined refuge, where peace reigns and where unknown wisdom and understanding await the seeker. Holding a tiny leather-bound tome in my hands, sewn and crafted much like a book was made hundreds of years ago, I feel I'm in a special place beyond the ordinary.

My journey started in 2020, at the start of the pandemic, when I was inspired by a tiny book that I bought online. At first I used simple methods and materials, but over time I became increasingly interested in using traditional sewing and binding methods— making “real” little books instead of simulacra. Many of my tiny books reproduce antiquarian texts that sought to observe and explain the natural phenomena of the world. As a result, my miniature books are designed to look old and worn.

In pursuing this craft, I'm just one more laborer in a long tradition of tiny bookmaking that goes back centuries. The last several years have been a time of constant experimentation at my mini-bookmaking work table. Although I've made every possible mistake at least once, my understanding of the craft has deepened. And my little books have received some positive attention, which is incredibly gratifying. But at the end of the day, when I'm curled over my work table trying to keep a head-mount magnifier balanced on my nose, I'm doing this for myself. For whatever reason, it's what I most enjoy doing, and I hope to keep shepherding little books into the world for the indefinite future.

Ruth Downes

Biography

Art has been part of my life for as long as I can remember, starting with drawings on typing paper as a toddler, and leading to formal study and a B.F.A. (University of Michigan) and M.F.A. (University of Illinois) in the 1980s,



*Culpeper's Herbal –
Prodigiorum ac ostentorum chronicon*

specializing in printmaking. Then, as is so often the case, I spent many years working in an entirely unrelated field — as a practicing lawyer — with creative pursuits relegated to the sidelines. Over time, art worked itself back into my life, beginning with etching, letterpress printing, woodcut and linocut printing, and jewelry, then watercolor, oil painting, and acrylic painting. Yet while I was happy with the product of these pursuits, something was missing in the process: the boundless absorption of childhood creativity, when "making" was as natural as breathing. The magic reawakened for me when I began making miniature books.

This endeavor beautifully combines so many of my passions and interests: books, bookmaking, history, mystery, miniatures, knowledge, and antiquity. Perhaps the most important factors in this pursuit, other than an obsessive desire to make books, have been stubborn persistence and a willingness to experiment and make mistakes.



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