



Marc Wanamaker

WIZARD OF OZ MINIATURE HOUSE REPORT

MINIATURE HOUSE CREATED FOR THE MOTION PICTURE (*The Wizard of Oz* MGM 1939)

Description

A miniature house (Dorothy Gale farmhouse) created by special effects department head Arnold Gillespie for the twister/tornado scene in the motion picture, *The Wizard of Oz*, MGM 1939. The house, which was modeled after Dorothy's farmhouse in Kansas, is constructed from various types of wood, individually cut roof shingles, glass windows, one chimney affixed and a front porch. One of three miniatures used in the twister sequence, this one was built to a scale of one-half inch to a foot. The miniature is stained in a grey color which would be photographed in Technicolor. The miniature's details are extraordinary for realism.

Importance in film history

The film *The Wizard of Oz* produced by MGM Studio and released in 1939, is still one of the most popular classic films of all time. This particular film is the greatest of all the "OZ" films made since 1914, when L. Frank Baum first picturized his stories. There are not many artifacts remaining from the production of the film which makes almost anything used in the production very rare and desirable.

We know of some key items that have surfaced over the years such as the *Dorothy Dresses*, several pairs of *Ruby Slippers* and other key props and costumes used and worn by the various characters. A great deal of publicity has been generated on this film that still creates an inter-generational popularity worldwide.

Provenance

The miniature farm house was originally conceived, designed and constructed in the MGM Special Effects Department under the direction of Alfred A. Gillespie who was the head of the Department during the making of *The Wizard of Oz* film. Gillespie was a master of both art and technology and served as head of special effects on more than 180 major feature films at Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios. For his work he received twelve Academy Award nominations and four Oscars. The primary source of provenance came from an Affidavit signed by Arnold Gillespie on November 30, 1973 authenticating the miniature house in an arbitration between former MGM President, James T. Aubrey and MGM Studios over issues with his contract.

Brian Wasserman, the owner of the miniature house, purchased it from MGM via Aubrey on April 16, 1970, shortly before the MGM Auction. MGM executives reprimanded Aubrey for selling this prop which should have been sold through the MGM auction as a studio asset. Wasserman, who purchased the miniature legally, obtained an MGM Inter-office memo addressed to the Accounting Department dated April 1970 and referenced as "B. Wasserman Purchase of Oz House". "Please ensure that the correct amount is collected being \$2,500 (Plus Tax) and at the time of pick-up. J. Aubrey, per PD". Wasserman also had a receipt slip dated April 16, 1970, "Received of B. Wasserman, Two-Thousand-Six Hundred-Twenty-Five, D2 House Prop."

Along with the sale documents, Wasserman provided the arbitrator with polaroid photographs of the miniature house that he had taken, which were marked as an exhibit at the hearing. These polaroids match the subject Oz house miniature. The miniature was kept by Brian Wasserman until it was acquired by the current owner.

Authentication

Gillespie in his 1973 affidavit stated: "All Three miniatures appear in the Tornado sequence and were damaged during production. The only miniature not to have been discarded was the one-half inch which is the one that was sold to the purchaser (the other sustained more damage and were not repaired). The miniature discussed here was repaired and inventoried for use in future productions. It was stored at the studio which is where I last saw it during a visit shortly before its sale."

Even though the authentication testimony of Special Effects expert Arnold Gillespie is conclusive on the issue of authenticity, a team of special effects experts were consulted to examine the Oz house miniature. Marc Wanamaker, Hollywood and motion picture historian, Matthew Gratzner, Special Effects supervisor, Fon Davis, Fonco Studios Special Effects producer, Gary Randall, motion picture and television Production Designer and Robert Welch, Arnold Gillespie's grandson and Special Effects expert, all examined the evidence presented and analyzed it over a period of time coming to the conclusion that this miniature house was indeed used in the film, *The Wizard of Oz*.

Studio miniature history was examined by comparing the miniature in question to miniatures used in previous films. Vintage miniatures usually have the level of detail we see in the Oz house miniature. Historical miniatures were meticulously hand-made usually from wood using aesthetic choices of detail depending on how it would be seen on screen. This miniature house has meticulously cut individual shingles that are 'mis-matched' to give the illusion of realism. It took a great deal of artistic model-making work to produce such detail. Miniatures are made to be 'believable' on the set. Arnold Gillespie, along with his Special Effects staff, designed and manufactured the house miniature along with two other miniatures that were made to different scales depending on how they were to be used. For a wide shot with a process screen in the rear showing the tornado in the countryside, a larger scale miniature would be needed. There are two "flying-shots" of the house. One would have been used descending, or dropped, and another used closer-up twirling with guide wires. This miniature was made to 24-scale, or one-half inches to the foot and shot at 60 frames per second.

All the special effect scenes were 'story-boarded' showing exactly what the miniatures would be doing in the various scenes that were shot on the stages. Tests were made after the mechanical experts figured out the rigging of the miniatures. Smoke and steam would be used to mask out the stage interior and give the illusion of a real house flying in the tornado. For the 'spinning house' scene, the miniature was rigged on a spinning bomber camera rig with wind, smoke and steam effects surrounding the house.

The Special Effects experts asked the question, "Does the miniature "Screen-Match"? By looking underneath the house showing the trusses and other details, parts of the miniature do indeed match while others do not which necessarily means that the miniatures had varied differences in their construction. A studio Special Effects Form No. 48, documents the making of the miniature houses showing what was made, how they were made and the cost. All the details on the making of the miniatures is recorded on the form. An example of what is on the form is as follows:

"EXT. HOUSE FALLING INTO CAMERA. House falling into the camera was made by suspending the house on a horizontal shaft, hung by wires to a gantry crane. House was hung with bottom close to the lens, rotating on the shaft, and moved away from the camera fast, as the house traveled away as it was raised and covered by a heavy smoke cloud. This action was reversed printed."

<i>Feb 24</i>	<i>Takes of house travelling to camera</i>
<i>Feb 25</i>	<i>Correction in the direction of the travel and smoke</i>
<i>March 9</i>	<i>House falling away against a white backing on Stage 30</i>
<i>March 10</i>	<i>Correction of clouds, backing and speed.</i>

When examining the footage of the falling house one can see the scale of the miniature house when it reaches the floor of the stage, and is retrieved by a stage hand, so you can see the size of the miniature in relation to the stage hand. This scene was printed in reverse showing the 'free-fall' of the model. There were three miniatures built for the film with the subject miniature being the only one which wasn't destroyed during filming. This model/minature was kept for future use at MGM and tagged as "Special" inventory. This 'special model' was very likely used for the closer-profile, twirling shots using guide wires which were attached through special holes on the roof and on the reverse of the model.

It appears that those miniatures which were not guided by wires were 'dropped' during filming and were consequently damaged. The miniature discussed in this report was the one with the guide-wire holes and survived the filming. I note that the Form No. 48 states under the remarks section:

"1/2 scale farmhouse spinning and rising vertically thru the steam and smoke effects, using backgrounds of tornado in the sky."

Upon viewing the film frames, we were able to determine that that the details of the roof shingles in the film were consistent with the details of the subject miniature

Another question posed by the Special Effects experts was what kind of glue was used in the making of the miniatures? This question was addressed by film historian Marc Wanamaker who mentioned that before contemporary times, animal glue was used by model and miniature makers. It was common practice by model makers, painting and antique restorers, that animal or "Hide" glue was used due to the fact that it could be reversed if needed. The synthetic glues which have been used in recent time create a more permanent bond, thus almost impossible to reverse. For studio miniature makers, hide glue could be changed and added due to breakage of miniatures during the filming. To determine the composition of the glue, tests were undertaken by TM Technology of Materials in Fullerton, California.

There was an analysis of (2) samples taken. One sample was taken from the miniature and another was taken from a Genuine Hide Glue purchased from Amazon. The conclusions drawn from the samples show that the glue sample from the miniature is HIDE GLUE.

Another question posed by the team of experts addresses the Property Department Tag found in the inside of the model and is seen through one of the windows. According to Mr. Gillespie's testimony in the 1973 Affidavit he says: *"In addition to my recognizing this particular miniature and noting its level of detail, I also note that the materials, manner and style of construction are consistent with those from the period and with Mr. Hubbard's workmanship. Lastly, the miniature bears an MGM property tag which was common with our props during this period and would not have been on a model, but on a useable miniature."*

Property Department 'Tags' have been employed by various studio property departments since the early 'teens' to keep track of their props (some of the props were rented out to other studios), some with inventory numbers or some as studio identification. The property tag within the Oz House miniature can be seen through one of the windows and states:

"MGM STUDIO, PROPERTY, CULVER CITY, CAL."

During and prior to the 1970 MGM Auction, property tags could be found on furniture, decoration, props of all kinds and on miniatures (the writer has examples of such tags). Some tags were put on valuable props as well as on props that were sometimes rented by other studios. Some tags had inventory numbers on them, usually made in the metal shop at the studio and were stamped.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Special Effect expert team listed the criteria for the miniature house's authentication as:

- (i) Bill of sale and receipt from former President of MGM, James T. Aubrey to Brian Wasserman
- (ii) The testimony by Arnold Gillespie as to the the authentication and provenance of the miniature
- (iii) The MGM Property Tag
- (iv) The size-scale of the miniature
- (v) The house miniature details
- (vi) The holes in the roof and bottom trusses
- (vii) The hide glue used during the time of construction
- (viii) The documents detailing the making and use of the miniature on MGM Special Effect Department "Form 48" and
- (ix) The findings of the Arbitrator

In authenticating this miniature used in the film, *The Wizard of Oz*, the evidence supporting the information about this Oz House Miniature is irrefutable. This miniature house was used in some key sequences in the film and is an historical artifact from one of the most important, classic films in motion picture history.



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