

An Interview with Rachel Tavaras, Indiana University Graduate and Collections Manager at the Museum of Miniature Houses in Carmel, Indiana

by Jason Baird Jackson on June 14, 2016

Rachel Tavaras grew up in the Chicago area and earned undergraduate degrees in History and Anthropology, both in the [College of Arts and Sciences](#) at Indiana University (IU), where she was inducted into Phi Beta Kappa. At IU, museum work was a special focus for her and she undertook internships and practicum at the [Mathers Museum of World Cultures](#), the [Wylie House Museum](#), the [Monroe County History Center](#), the [Hinkle-Garton Farmstead](#), and the [LaPorte County History Museum](#). After graduation in 2015, she joined the [Historical Administration M.A. program](#) at Eastern Illinois University (EIU). This highly regarded program is built around an on-campus year of coursework and hands-on training followed by a six-month supervised internship or job in a relevant museum or historical institution. While at EIU she was a graduate assistant at the [Tarble Arts Center](#). Eager to catch-up with an outstanding undergraduate alumna who made a big difference during her time at Indiana University, I was pleased that Rachel agreed to an interview with me. In it we discuss her first job hunt, the [Museum of Miniature Houses](#) in Carmel, Indiana, where she now serves as Collections Manager, and her experience studying at Indiana and Eastern Illinois.

JJ: Thank you Rachel for being willing to do this interview.

Folk wisdom holds—and I think that it is often true—that one’s first full time job is often the hardest to find. We will come to your current work in a moment, but first could you tell us a bit about how you first got connected with the Museum of Miniature Houses?

RT: The initial job hunting process was quite daunting! My graduate program at Eastern Illinois University requires that we complete a six-month internship after coursework, unless we find a job. While I would not have had an issue with taking an internship, I sought something more permanent. When I saw an opening for the Collections Manager position at the Museum of Miniature Houses and Other Collections through the [Association of Indiana Museums](#) (AIM), I did not hesitate to apply.

Miniatures have always fascinated me, and, while I did not have a background in miniatures explicitly, I felt that my prior experiences with other types of collections could apply. From working with jewelry from the Middle East at Mathers, to working with Midwestern folk art dioramas at the Tarble Arts Center, I felt confident in my ability to work with a collection of objects made by less “formally trained” artisans. My theoretical training, both in class and in the museum field, also helped when it came to landing the job. I have been trained in methods of material culture, decorative arts, understanding folklife, and more. Such training is essential to

understanding miniatures, whether it be a representation of an American Rococo living room or a Japanese farm house from Osaka.



Rachel Tavaras shows off the “Yellow Georgian,” an assemblage of objects in the collections of the Museum of Miniature Houses in Carmel, Indiana.

JJ: Did you have any personal contacts with the museum beforehand or were you applying in response to the AIM advertisement? What did you learn from the application and selection process?

I did not have any personal contacts from the museum beforehand—I applied merely because of the online advertisement. Because I did not know anyone at the museum personally, every chance to leave an impression with the hiring committee was especially precious.

Because of this, through the hiring process I came to better understand the importance of the interview. I think that many recent graduates focus heavily on their resume and cover letter—and rightfully so. These are the first items that a potential employer looks over, and they will ultimately determine the applicant’s chance at an interview. For the interview, I was fully prepared and had anticipated many of the questions that the hiring committee asked. I had also researched the institution and miniatures in general beforehand, giving me the opportunity to explicitly express how my skills and experiences would make me a great asset. My efforts were

worthwhile. Since being hired, I have been told that I “nailed” the interview. While my application materials got me the interview, it was my interview that got me the job.

I have since had the opportunity to be on the other end of the hiring process. Looking for a part-time Collections Assistant was an intimidating task, especially being so new to my own position. While sifting through applicants, I was reminded of the importance of first impressions. Many applicants sent vague and brief application materials. It was clear that they did not read the job description. On the other hand, one applicant both emailed and physically mailed me copies of her application. She was a high contender.

JJ: The name alone suggests that the Museum of Miniature Houses is a rather interesting institution. I won't be alone in wanting to know more about it. Is the part-time Collections Assistant your only staff colleague or is the staff bigger than these two roles? Do volunteers play a big part in your museum? What can you tell us about the history of the museum and its current status? Who is the museum's governance authority?

RT: The Museum was founded in 1993 by three Indiana miniature artisans. Our three founders sought to preserve and display scale miniatures, as well as historic dollhouses and similar items. Such scale miniatures include, but are not limited to, miniature room boxes, houses, and individual items—especially furniture. It opened in an old renovated farmhouse, which has since seen expansion. Our neighborhood is what has recently become the [Carmel Arts and Design District](#).

While two of our founders are still very active in the museum, one has since passed away (though she was an active founder during her lifetime). The surviving founders serve as board members, one being the President and the other serving as the Collections Consultant. Before I was hired as Collections Manager, this founder managed the museum's collection on a volunteer basis. We have seven other Board Members besides the two founders, including five Directors, a Board Secretary, and a Treasurer. All board members are very knowledgeable when it comes to the realm of miniatures, and all have been very willing to answer any questions that I have had as I continue to learn more about this art form.

Fortunately for me, our staff size does extend beyond the roles of Collections Manager and Collections Assistant. Our Collections Assistant position is, for now, filled by temporary staff. A paid summer intern, for example, is filling the role for the next couple of months. As for our permanent staff, we have two employees besides myself: the Operations Manager and the Executive Director. The Operations Manager manages volunteers, maintenance of the building, mailings, and so on, while the Executive Director deals with fundraising, publicity, and exhibit conceptualization. Of course, their duties don't end there—a museum staff members' work is never done, especially at a smaller institution! Most tasks are a group effort.

Volunteers play a very large role in the museum. We have as many as 18 regular volunteers per month. Most act as docents—giving tours, greeting visitors, and supervising exhibit spaces alongside staff. Many volunteers are members of the Board, which is fantastic. An active Board is ideal.

JJ: This sounds great. Like in other medium-sized museums, your work is diverse but you are not all alone, as at some smaller museums—house museums, for instance.

Do you feel like your training, first at IU and later in the Historical Administration masters degree program at EIU prepared you for the role that you are filling now? What reflections do you have on your undergraduate and graduate training?

RT: My time at IU and EIU were crucial in preparation for a role like this. By the end of my time at IU, I had worked with five different museums and historic sites, all complementing the interdisciplinary classroom education that I had received there. A couple of these museums, like Mathers and Wylie House, were IU museums, making the University all the more crucial to my current successes. Reflecting on previous museum internships during my time at IU, I learned much more than simply how to catalog an object. As important as proper documentation might be, there are more nuances surrounding museum work that just cannot be learned in a classroom. I came to better understand the politics that surround a collection, in turn learning the amount of diplomacy that managing a collection can take.

My coursework at IU prepared me for museum work in a different kind of way, some of which were somewhat unexpected. In my Tour Guide and Interpretation course through the IU [School of Public Health](#)'s Outdoor Recreation Program, I learned how to more effectively use a museum's collection to engage an audience. In my history and anthropology coursework, I gained more theoretical training that I've been able to put into practice when researching and evaluating the museum's collection. Such classroom training makes me a better collections manager, since I am able to analyze and interpret objects using multiple approaches and perspectives.

The EIU Historical Administration Program trained me specifically for a job like this, though that does not make my time at IU any less valuable. At EIU, I took theoretical coursework on material culture, decorative arts, and historic architecture. What I've taken from these courses has been very practical in my current position. It is a great time saver to have the visual literacy to be able to readily identify, for instance, a rococo chair or a saltbox-style house. These skills have proven to be essential when a lot of the collection consists of miniature furniture and houses. Of course, my more hands-on coursework at EIU has proved to be of value here too. In my Collections Care and Management class, we established visual literacy in material identification. Because many miniature artisans are quite resourceful, many materials in miniature houses are not what they appear to be at first glance. Being able to properly identify materials used in such miniatures allows me to determine the best course of care for such items.

JJ: As a teacher concerned with preparing IU students for jobs like yours, that is certainly a very encouraging reflection. On the other side of the coin then, what has been your biggest surprise since beginning your work at the Museum of Miniature Houses? Similarly, what do you wish you had learned along the way that you are now picking up on the job?

RT: While I have learned so much from previous experiences, my previous supervisors and instructors could not teach me everything! Until this position, I did not have any experience dealing with budgetary restrictions, at least not firsthand. Coming into the job, I found that there

was a limited amount of archival supplies on hand. The collection had been properly cared for, however, if I want to continue with best care, I have to go through the expense that is keeping up with the collection. Unfortunately, limited supplies and resources are a harsh reality to every museum. While I had always been mindful not to waste supplies before, I am just now starting to have a better appreciation for just how expensive this stuff is! While I'm sure that my previous supervisors deal with these same kinds of limitations, it is just not something that I thought much about before now. On a positive note, I learned how to be resourceful in my museum studies classes and previous internships. Skills I have previously acquired, like how to construct an acid-free box rather than buying one that is pre-made, can really cut down on expenses. Also, our Executive Director is very mindful of the expense that goes with maintaining a collection and has been dutiful about writing grants and engaging in other methods of fundraising to ensure that we have extra supplies.

The biggest learning curve, however, has been very specific to miniatures. Learning the big names, the different hallmarks and signatures of artisans, and construction methods are some things that I am learning as I go through the collection. Fortunately, there are a plethora of books available to me to help with this endeavor. Some things, however, I will have to figure out using my own best judgment. For instance, the *Museum Registration Methods* (American Association of Museums, 2010) book does not have much advice when it comes to physically attaching a number to a miniature sconce. Some of this will be trial and error, but most of it will be applying what I've already learned and adapting it to these new circumstances.

JJ: All of those challenges sound familiar to me and, I think, to those who have trod a similar path as yours before you. So here is a fun question with which to end. What is your favorite object (so far) at the Museum of Miniature Houses? Why?

My favorite object would have to be the "Yellow Georgian." Commissioned by Dorothy Stickles, one of our major donors. The house features beautiful examples of miniature furniture and needlework. The area rugs within the house are exquisite, and many of the furniture pieces are of the highest craftsmanship within the miniatures sphere. It's an excellent example of miniatures as art, but this house alone is not a complete representation of our collection! We have miniatures from all over the world, including farmhouses from Japan and furniture from Haiti. We also have miniature houses and room box sets that tell stories. Dolls take on roles in scenes depicted through facial expressions, body language, and aesthetic surroundings. It's a fun collection to work with!

JJ: Thank you Rachel for sharing a glimpse of your career as an emerging museum professional. Congratulations on the completion of your studies at Indiana University and Eastern Illinois University and on settling in at the Museum of Miniature Houses.