Library in a cupboard: a story of miniature books

Kapnisi, Sofia

1662023

Bridging Theory and Practice

Course Coordinator: Prof. P.G. Hoftijzer

24 October 2015

Word count: 1455

Library in a cupboard: a story of miniature books

'It is as old as mankind, replicating things in miniature.' Guus Thurkow

In the video *They are giants*, presented at Meermanno museum, Guus Thurkow defends the art of making miniature books. Thurkow made it his life work to create a library of miniature books: the Bibliotheca Thurkowiana Minor. The library, created in 2001 in the style of 17th-and 18th-century Dutch doll houses, contains 1515 books of which the oldest is a clay tablet from 1803 BC. Many of the books were printed especially for the collection of the library, but the majority were purchased by the collector: manuscripts, books from East Europe, books printed in only one copy, or publications from the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries. The collection is divided in sections such as Mathematica, Archeologica, Historia, Physica, etc., and also includes a secretly placed Erotica section, called 'L'Enfer'. Museum Meermanno acquired the library in 2012, in the context of the museum's interest in special book forms; the museum's collection already contained 600 miniature books, so the new acquisition quadrupled the size of the collection. In order to secure its maintenance, the museum has set up a crowdfunding project called 'Adopt a miniature book'. The audience is called to adopt one of ten selected miniatures, for a small amount of money; on the list we find a Book of Hours in Latin, manuscript from the 15th century, a Bible from The Hague of 1719, but also an English edition of a study on dinosaurs of 1988.

Miniatures are produced on a wide variety of subjects, including science, technique, and popular literature; however, two of the more popular subjects have always been the Bible (e.g. the thumb Bibles) and Lilliput Dictionaries. Children's books and almanacs come third in popularity, mostly developed in the 18th century when 'women and children were admitted much more freely to the hitherto mainly masculine domain of books, and tiny books in particular were much more frequently specially designed for them.'

Miniature books are considered by printers and bookbinders as one of the most difficult type of book to produce, and thus a challenge for proving high

craftsmanship. Though the acceptable size of a miniature book is not unanimous across the world, a maximum book face of 76mm is the norm. The miniaturisation is applied to all the aspects of the book, such as the fonts, the illustrations, the bindings and the general design. The reasons of the existence of miniature books, apart from the obvious aesthetic interest, vary from portability (useful for students, religious travellers, and common travellers), to uses as charms for protection (in several countries including Holland), or as method for propaganda (or method for concealing illegal information). 'Miniature books have also been used as a compact method of storing much information in very little space for the future', as Doris V. Welsh states, when describing a project conducted by the Oglethorpe University of Atlanta, Georgia: during the first half of the 20th century, hundreds of important books were copied in microfilm and then sorted in a vault for posterity.

However, miniature books have been mostly seen as collectible objects and as convenient companions to travellers. In the early years of 17th c. the concept of the "travelling library" was developed; a container for miniature printed books. It is thought to be originated by Sir Julius Caesar, who invented a 'post-chaise library', a case shaped like a folio volume that held 40 volumes, on theology, philosophy, history, and poetry. The books came mostly from the press of Plantin at Leiden, printed between 1591 and 1619. Another famous travelling library belonged to Napoleon Bonaparte; it is thought to have contained a set of 63 volumes, published by J.B. Fournier in Paris. Since the beginning of print, most publishers took the challenge to produce some miniature books next to their normal book production. Nowadays there are over a hundred publishing houses worldwide specialised in printing miniature books; "Los Libros Mas Pequenos Del Mundo" in Peru, "Leipzig.Miniaturbuchverlag" in Germany, "Miyako Akai Kototsubo" in Japan, etc.

The collectability of miniature books is equal to that of the normal size books; it is supported by book collectors as well as miniaturists who use them as objects in their projects, like in dolls houses. The popularity of miniature books has led to the formation in 1983 of the Miniature Book Society (MBS) in the US, while similar societies exist in Germany and in Russia. The societies inform about auctions, events

and collections, publish a relevant journal and often maintain a forum. Special collections of miniature books exist all over the world, and usually make part of a library, like the British library, or the Bodleian library at Oxford University; more rarely, special libraries of miniatures are made to house an existing collection, such as the library in Baku, Azerbaijan.

The Bibliotheca Thurkowiana Minor is unique in the world in terms of precision in imitating a private library of the 19th century. Though the access to the books is restricted, in the room that hosts it, there are displays organised by theme and show in rotation selected objects of the collection. A magnifying glass is placed on each vitrine (fig. 1), as for many, the tiny types used do not allow reading with bare eyes. Contemporary editions of miniatures often come with a magnifying glass, especially for the smallest books among them. However, sometimes a stronger viewing equipment is needed.

'The smallest book in the world' is an idea accompanying the production of miniatures; each century has its own 'smallest book', most of which cannot be read but with a microscope. The latest smallest book, *Teeny Ted from Tunip Town*, an illustrated story written by Malcolm Douglas Chaplin, was made with the use of nanotechnology, by Canadian scientists, in 2007; it is a book sized 0,07 x 0,1 mm, which would fit on the width of a human hair, thus only readable with an electronic microscope with magnification power 8000 times.

The width of a human hair, the size of a grain of salt, big as your thumb nail, or a little bit bigger, the miniature book entails the human qualities of playfulness and artistry, as well as the love of oddity and delicacy. It is an acknowledged item in the publishing field and an object of interest for the collectors. Adopting a miniature book, responding to Museum Meermanno's call, is a first step into this fascinating world.

Bibliography

Bondy, Louis W., *Miniature Books: their history from the beginnings to the present day*

(London: Sheppard Press Limited, 1981).

Bromer, Anne C. and Edison, Julian I, *Miniature Books: 4.000 years of tiny treasures* (New York: Abrams/ The Grolier Club, 2007).

International Exhibition for Calligraphy, 'Miniature book: past, present and future', <http://calligraphy-expo.com/eng/aboutcalligraphy/library/minibooks.aspx?itemid=1469> (22 October 2015).

Meermanno museum, 'Bijzondere Boekvormen', (20 October 2015). < http://www.meermanno.nl/index/-/g-0/p-bijzondere-boekvormen> (22 October 2015).

Miniature Book Society, 'Publishers', < http://mbs.org/publishers.html> (22 October 2015).

Welsh, Doris V., *The History of Miniature Books* (Albany, New York: Fort Orange Press Inc., 1987).