

***Enchanting Museum Education:
The Wee Faerie Village at the Florence Griswold Museum***

By David D.J. Rau

Outfitted with sparkling pink wings, a feathered tiara and a glittering tutu, the little girl stands beneath a canopy of golden autumn leaves holding her faerie village map in one hand and a cell phone in the other.

“Listen, Mommy,” she says, tilting the cell phone toward her mother while peering into a fallen log decorated with tiny furniture, miniature paintings and a teeny easel.

From the phone comes this message: “You have reached the studio of Luna, and I’m not here right now because it’s probably daylight and I prefer to work at night by the light of the moon. But if you stay on the line, I’ll let you in on a secret. Do you know the artist Childe Hassam? Well it was me—*moi*—who inspired his artistic talents and made him famous!”

While listening to Luna’s narrative, the girl and her mother scan the faerie dwelling—constructed of bark, shells and moss adhered with beeswax—in search of all the details Luna describes, including a driftwood spire echoing the steeple of a local Congregational church that Hassam made famous in his paintings. After hearing Luna’s secret “magic” word, they begin their search for the next faerie dwelling.

This little girl and her mother were only two of a record-breaking 10,672 visitors who toured the first-ever “Wee Faerie Village” at the Florence Griswold Museum in Old Lyme, Conn., during its three-week run in October 2009. Nestled in the nooks and crannies of the museum’s nearly 12 acres of historic gardens and grounds were more than two dozen faerie dwellings—miniature habitats made of natural or found materials and scaled for a winged faerie 3 inches tall or less.

The “Wee Faerie Village” project was designed to encourage visitors to explore practically every inch of the intimate campus as part of our “Year of the American Landscape.” This thematic approach underscored the connections among several major projects being coordinated by different departments at

the museum. The theme encompassed art exhibitions, the transformation of a historic barn into a landscape center and the commissioning of *The Rambles*, an original “stickwork” sculpture by North Carolina artist Patrick Dougherty. The finished sculpture, made of woven saplings, resembles a large-scale faerie castle and served as inspiration for the smaller creations.

The idea for the museum’s faerie village came from the annual Fairy House Garden Tour held in Portsmouth, N.H., and organized by children’s book author and faerie house aficionado Tracy Kane. Rather than focus on generic magical creatures, however, our museum decided to link faeries directly to the history of the Lyme Art Colony, the core interpretive story of the institution. The museum’s village would be inhabited by wee faerie muses portrayed as having inspired the art colony members, who boarded at the Griswold House in the early 20th century and produced a wealth of American Impressionist paintings.

To create the faerie dwellings, the museum approached more than 40 individuals, including not only such traditional artists as landscape painters and sculptors but college professors, librarians, curators, architects, landscape designers, naturalists, children’s authors, interior decorators, docents, gardeners and exhibition designers. The dwelling architects selected one of the historic artists represented in the museum’s collection before choosing a building site. For the most part, they worked independently over the summer, constructing their houses and filling them with miniature furniture fashioned out of pebbles, acorns and bark. They combed the nearby forest for moss, stumps and fungi to create miniscule gardens, parapets and pathways. Some created skinny ladders from dried stalks and fences with pencils and twine. They arrived with loads of pinecones, shells and stones, and installed their playful creations during the first week in October, only a few days before the village opened to the public. Several of the wayfinding signs were still being installed on the morning of the opening day when the first car arrived—followed by another, and another, and another.

To begin their enchanting adventure, visitors received a “Wee Faerie Village Map” and a ring-jingle—a simple bracelet of beads and bells. The bracelet served as a ticketing device, and its jingle was to warn the faeries of a visitor’s approach. Because the faerie event was geared toward families with

children, many of whom the museum anticipated being first-time visitors, this map provided a family-friendly introduction to the history of the site and the “Wee Faerie Village.” The language of the map was colorful and storybook-like in tone:

Once upon a time in the land of Old Lyme lived a sea captain’s daughter named Florence. She lived in a big yellow house near colorful flower gardens, small barns for farm animals, and the sparkling waters of the Lieutenant River. When little Florence grew up and became Miss Florence, the house eventually became hers. Miss Florence neither married nor had any children, and in order to make money, she decided to let people visiting Old Lyme stay with her in what became known as the Griswold boardinghouse.

This introduction continued with a brief history of the Lyme Art Colony and emphasized the artists’ tradition of painting *en plein air*:

Henry Ward Ranger, a painter from New York City, was one of the first people to stop at the boardinghouse. He promised Miss Florence that he would bring his artist friends to Old Lyme the following summer to fill up her many rooms. These artists came prepared to paint outside or *en plein air* with their palettes, brushes, paints in tin tubes and portable easels. They would head out in the morning ready to paint the flowers in the gardens or the cows on a nearby farm. These artists formed a group called the Lyme Art Colony. They showed their fondness for Miss Florence by painting pictures on the doors and wall panels of her antique home.

The story concluded with the faeries and their miniature village:

Invisible to most during these many summers were the wee faerie muses that arrived with each artist. These mysterious creative helpers offered the painters sparks of inspiration. Flying back and forth, the wee faeries told the painters which colors to use and how best to render the subject in front of them. . . . Being creatures of the natural world the faeries sought out dwelling places in the hollows of trees or among the roots and rocks along the riverbank. They only needed to be near enough to hear the familiar rattle of their artist packing for a day of painting to fly to their

side and be off for another day of artistic adventure. With the coming and goings of so many artists and their faeries, a village of faerie dwellings naturally emerged on the property.

Many families read this aloud to their children as they headed outside in search of the first faerie dwelling, while the children (as well as mom and dad) shook their ring-jingles to warn the faeries that they were on the way. The introduction also informed families about a cell phone tour in which the faeries would explain about their house and the artist they inspired.

The map listed the faerie dwellings along the route with faerie-sounding locations like “Far Far Far Away” (located in a distant corner of the property), “Marshmellows” (located on the banks of the salt marsh) and “Water Fall Downs” (located at a drop in the small babbling brook). It also listed the wee muses by their faerie names, such as Whisp, “N,” Rusty and Tweed, witty monikers that were often wordplays on some aspect of the historic artists or their art. The faerie Hazel, for instance, was linked with Bruce Crane, a painter whose ethereal images were often veiled in a light mist or haze, and the faerie Moo was depicted as inspiring the artist William Henry Howe, who was famous for painting cows. Last, the map included the numbers for the “Guide by Cell” phone tour.

The range of artistic expression in the faerie dwellings was truly astounding. For instance, Moo’s dwelling used a cow’s skull attached to a large tree with baling twine. The eye sockets were transformed into windows glazed with twigs and translucent money plant petals. The mouth became the front door, complete with a small gateway and porch reached via a rope and stick ladder. (Moo claimed to be big-boned and not always capable of flight.)

The faerie Harpa’s dwelling was conceived as a painter’s studio complete with easel and miniature canvases, built in a cigar box outfitted with a trap door and a ladder made from harp strings. This was attached to the top of one of Griswold House’s columns and best viewed through the upstairs gallery window. This faerie’s artist had painted a portrait of Miss Florence playing her harp; the artwork hangs in the main hallway of the boardinghouse.

Another abode was conceived as an underwater home for Undine, inspired by the historic water

faerie and constructed in the base of Griswold House's well house. Viewed through an opening on the side of the well, this habitat comprised hundreds of seashells and bits of coral. The watery depths were conveyed through colored mist and sparkling fiber-optic lights. This faerie's job was described as inspiring the husband-and-wife artist team of Harry and Beatrice Hoffman, who created underwater scenes they had observed through a glass-bottom bucket during trips to the Caribbean.

All that was missing in these magical creations were the actual faeries. We believed that invisible faeries would best spark the imaginations of visitors, who could listen to recorded faerie narratives on the cell phone tour. Most of these narratives began with the faeries explaining why they were away from their home and inviting the listener to look more closely. The faeries enthusiastically explained the connections between their houses and the artists they inspired. They also suggested where in the museum the listener could see the actual artworks created by the artists they inspired. For instance, when visitors found themselves at the small farmhouse shingled with pumpkin seeds in "Vegetable Valley," they could call the faerie and hear the following:

Hello! My name is Iris, like the beautiful flowers in Miss Florence's garden. Sorry I am not home right now. I'm out harvesting seeds. Please feel free to look around my house. You'll notice my house is made of a box of artist's pastels that I found on the bank of the Lieutenant River. You know how those artists are. Sometimes they are so caught up in their work that they just leave their supplies behind. This is lucky for me because I was easily able to fashion it after my favorite painting by Matilda Browne. It's titled *Saltbox by Moonlight*. You can go see the painting yourself when you visit the Kriebler Gallery later. I am the faerie muse of Matilda Browne, and while you are looking around you will find many clues that reveal a bit about both of us.

The spirited narratives were written to give each faerie her own personality, and were recorded by local high school students enrolled in a musical performance class. The students were proud of their involvement in the faerie project; they each had their pictures taken in front of their faeries' dwelling. The combination of drama and technology made the faerie village "cool," even for a high school-aged audience.

To encourage visitors to listen to as many entire narratives as possible, the museum initiated a contest to win a handcrafted faerie door. To enter, visitors had to collect at least 15 of the magic words revealed by the faeries at the end of their narrative. Visitors entered their lists into a random drawing via e-mail, which had the added benefit of providing the museum with a list of new contacts.

The museum had projected that attendance for the village and its related programming (e.g., a series of “Twinkling Twilight Firefly Tours,” “Faerieology 101” presentations, “Faerie Wings and Yummy Things Tea Parties” and a “Not-So-Scary Faerie Halloween Costume Parade”) might reach 3,000, and printed faerie maps accordingly. By the end of the first frantic week, we recalculated and quickly ordered 5,000 additional maps.

By the second weekend, it was clear that faerie-mania had struck. Indeed, the faerie dust never settled for three weeks, and the crowds kept growing. Cases of jingle bells were over-nighted to the museum to meet demand. The ticket line filled the lobby and snaked out the door. Other town organizations offered up their parking lots to accommodate the overflow. Museum members worked tirelessly to direct traffic, explain cell phone tours and assist in popular hands-on craft projects. Staff and volunteers spent their evenings making hundreds of ring-jingle bracelets. The museum’s shop reordered faerie-related magnets, puzzles, wings, dust (glitter in glass bottles) and books. The faerie magic was infectious: A professional photographer documented the dwellings *gratis*, a local chanteuse led the Halloween parade and the town ice cream parlor offered cones of Huckle Faerie ice cream.

The museum’s general attendance was up 662 percent compared to the same three-week period of the prior year. For the entire event, including special evening tours and school group visits, the number of ticketed visitors to the village was just under 20 percent of total attendance for the whole year. Moreover, many of the faerie village visitors returned to the museum after the event ended to enjoy late-fall programming and holiday activities, helping to exceed all year-end attendance projections.

The real indicator of success, however, was the overwhelming positive feedback from our visitors, young and old alike. Many stayed for hours and even made their own faerie house out of found pinecones and sticks in a woodsy area called “Beyond the Beyond.” Scores of new houses appeared each

day. One young visitor named Miranda echoed the reaction of many when she wrote in the comment book, “The fairy houses were *amazing!*” To that, her friend Sarah added, “They make me want to build one when I go home.”

David D.J. Rau is director of education and outreach, Florence Griswold Museum, Old Lyme, Conn.