



Alice in Wonderland: Making Magic with Shadow Box Dolls

by Lillian Alberti

In the many years that I have been creating one-of-a-kind art dolls, the starting process has always been the same; I have a doll pictured in my mind's eye, much like an image that pops into your head as you're reading an engrossing book. Often, the doll is in a setting — outdoors, for instance, walking in a field, or in a room surrounded by her belongings. When I construct the doll and only the doll, by necessity, I remove her from this setting. This has long bothered me because the picture I once envisioned is never really completed.

Recently, in an effort to create a smaller, lower-cost product to offer collectors — someone who might not be ready to invest in one of my free-standing art dolls — I set about exploring this

conundrum and was struck with the idea of creating a doll within a shadow box. Happily, by incorporating the doll within a box, I found the perfect way to get the setting along with the doll, thus completing my picture! What originally started out as a practical idea had become something more.

I discovered that, while working within the box's 5" x 7" space, I was able to do interesting things with scale, depth and perspective. I found I could manipulate not only the physical space of the piece but almost capture a moment frozen in time. The simple act of encasing the doll actually opened up a wide range of possibilities. Artists interested in exploring this shadow box idea may want to consider the following tips. →



First, decide on scale

One can always follow the normal scenario, with the doll and its surroundings all in the same proportional scale. I have done this many times and have always been pleased with the outcome. Things become more interesting, however, when you play with the scale; the doll can be made a pre-determined height with all its surroundings made to appear proportionately smaller. I have found this approach very exciting. For example, a tiny cookie takes on new meaning when juxtaposed with a large figure, as shown in my "Alice" box. The white rabbit escaping through a small door and the tiny golden key just out of Alice's reach call further attention to the scale. The opposite approach, of course, will offer a whole new take on the scene: a tiny doll, surrounded by enormous objects, can be made to appear vulnerable in her surroundings.

Second, consider perspective

Decide on your focal point and look for ways to draw the eye to what lies beyond and outside that point. A doll perched on a three dimensional wall, for example, comes alive when the wall is painted to appear receding into the background of your box. This forces the viewer's eye to look past the focal point. The March Hare and Mad Hatter character dolls are the obvious focal point of my box "The Tea Party," but the tiny painted Alice rushing down the hill toward them catches the viewer's eye and expands the scene beyond the focal point. The trees painted in the corners of the box further extend the scene by unifying all walls. In my piece "The Duchess," the character doll itself is a formidable presence that fills the frame of the box which encases her. But the painted window, which runs perpendicular to the background, broadens the scene, offering a peek into her outside world.

Finally, consider depth

This is an opportunity to create magic, to capture the viewer's attention and really draw them in. I have been told that each time someone sees one of my boxes, they discover something new they hadn't noticed before. The box becomes a tiny world that invites exploration. The background scenes you as the artist choose to create will coax the viewer into believing that the scene extends →



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beyond the mere four walls of the box. For instance, by setting a princess in the foreground standing by a window, you can offer the viewer a glimpse of the far-reaching kingdom behind her. My "Tea Party" box is a good example of that approach. The character dolls enjoying their tea in the foreground draw the eye initially, but it's the flower-covered hillside just beyond that captivates the viewer's curiosity.

It goes without saying that scale, perspective and depth are present in all shadow boxes, but by deciding beforehand which aspects to accentuate or downplay, one can transform a simple box into a work of art. With each box I create, I try to open tiny windows into my imagination, allowing me to share with others the complete pictures I've envisioned in my mind's eye. I call on all art doll artists to take up this challenge and give it a try; offer your audience a window into the world of your imagination! ♦

Lillian Alberti lives in New York State where she creates full-scale ODAK art dolls as well as ODAK shadow boxes. She is a member of the AMA (Association of Miniature Artists; non typical format) and of the CNYDAG (Central New York Doll Artisans Guild). You can see more of her work on her Web site: www.a-lil-whimsy.com. For whimsical, one-of-a-kind creations by Lillian Alberti, phone: (845) 988-5482.