

# Wendy Smale: Collectors' Collector

As miniaturists we are born collectors. Whether you make everything by hand or fill your vignettes with the very best that artisans have to offer, we are all collectors at heart. **Deb Weissler** looks at the miniature world of Wendy Smale.

*Photos by Wendy Smale.*



**Ammonites:**  
Back row: Black, Peru; split and polished half, Madagascar; iridescent shell also showing patch with suture lines, Madagascar.  
Front row: Tiny one, Morocco; hematite replacement ammonite, Morocco.

As a child growing up in Gloucestershire, Wendy Smale may not have been aware of the rich and storied history of Britain's great collections, but collecting was already in her blood as she picked up tiny fossils from the gravel in the family drive, tucking them carefully away in a matchbox.

"My father was a civil servant and we spent three years in Australia when I was three to six," Wendy fondly recalls. "My parents did a great job exposing us to British history and nature. We toured stately homes, prehistoric earthworks, castles, museums, wildlife sanctuaries, and took lots of walks

and cycle rides in the countryside."

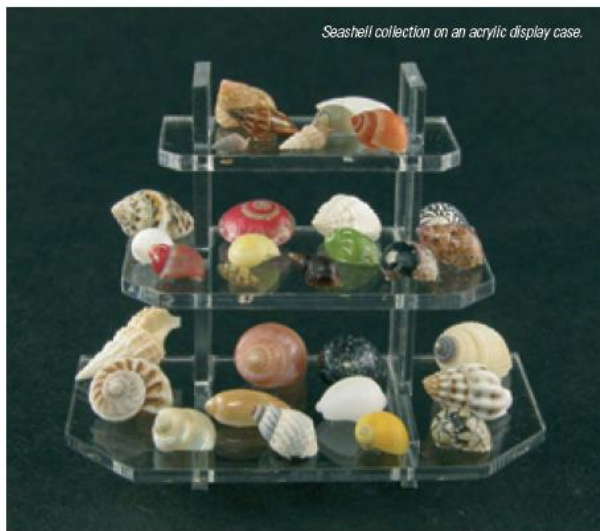
In secondary school and with an eye on university, Wendy selected maths, physics and history A levels, an odd combination that required her school to rearrange the class schedules to accommodate her. It turned out to be the ideal mix for the university course Wendy eventually chose - Archaeological Sciences at the University of Bradford. It was a ground-breaking programme - an amalgam of sciences and humanities. With her leanings towards the scientific, Wendy also audited a course in paleopathology that inspired her thesis.

University not only satisfied her

love of science, it was where she also met her husband. They came to America for graduate school and stayed. With her background, Wendy worked as an educator for a watershed preservation group and a science museum. She also started her own business teaching hands-on science programmes to pre-schoolers. Along the way she started her own shell collection.

## Miniature pillows

In 2000 Wendy's husband built dolls houses for their daughters and she discovered the world of miniatures. With a well-stocked miniature shop nearby, she began attending miniature fairs and joined



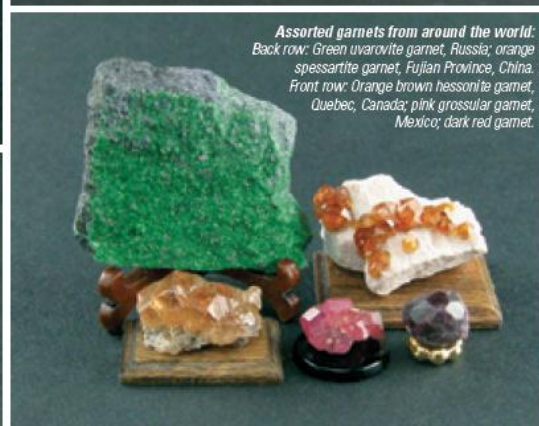
Seashell collection on an acrylic display case.



*Oddities: Front on gold base: Fossil sting ray tail barb, Florida; Back row: polished white orthoceras fossil in black matrix, Morocco; fossil mosasaur tooth, Morocco; sea urchin spine, Philippines; fulgurite or 'fused lightning' (from a lightning strike on sand), North Africa.*



Three Mexican geodes mounted on jewelry finds.



*Assorted garnets from around the world: Back row: Green uvarovite garnet, Russia; orange spessartite garnet, Fujian Province, China. Front row: Orange brown hessonite garnet, Quebec, Canada; pink grossular garnet, Mexico; dark red garnet.*

online mini groups. Eventually she turned to creating her own miniatures and it was her fabulous silk pillows in 1/12th scale that would establish her reputation as a talented artisan.

Wendy's pillow business grew by word-of-mouth and her web contacts. When IGMA Fellow Gerda Van Dijk posted a request for miniature pillows against which to display her tiny ivory lace bobbins, Wendy sent her a sample and Gerda immediately bought several.

Hoping for a small order, Wendy next took a sample of her work to Tony Liguori, owner of 'Miniatures & More' in Madison, NJ, who loved the quality of her work and bought every pillow she had. Later, moving to Michigan, she teamed up with miniature artisan Kari Bloom, well known for her Art Deco, Arts & Crafts and mid-century Modern furniture. Now, living in Ohio, her pillows grace the fabulous leather furniture of artisan Gail Steffey.

### Natural history in miniature

It wasn't long before Wendy realized some of the shells she had been collecting would work well in 1/12th scale and from there branched out to buying and selling natural history specimens of all kinds: crystals, minerals, fossils, geodes, and an assortment of curiosities.

For centuries the wealthy and educated enjoyed collecting, and in the Victorian and Edwardian periods collectors vied at fever pitch for the very best that treasure hunters could provide. From small specimens set upon a desk or shelf, curiosity cabinets filled with the strange and wonderful, to entire rooms dedicated to a collector's every whim, Britain was known for its extraordinary treasures brought in from all over the empire. And lest you think collections only reside in studies, libraries, or other manly spaces, Wendy is quick to point out that

many women were collectors of more than just dainty tchotchkes.

"Although most of the collectors were men, there also were notable women. Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire was an enthusiastic and scholarly mineral collector, and many of her specimens are still owned by the family. Mary Anning was a renowned fossil collector and palaeontologist. Catherine the Great of Russia collected high quality minerals and established a mining institute and museum for gem and mineral treasures."

Wendy chooses her specimens carefully, striving to find those pieces that will be particularly appealing in miniature - whether in 1/12th, 1/24th, or 1/48th scales. Since specimens come in a variety of colours, collectors can concentrate on a single type, colour palette, or coordinate or contrast their pieces with their room's colour scheme.

Her offerings can be lustrous, matte or glittery; translucent or opaque. Crystals, minerals, and



**Crystals and minerals:**  
 Back row: Orange wulfenite on red-brown matrix, Arizona; white gypsum, Mexico; orange-red vanadinite, Arizona.  
 Front row: Green diopside, Namibia; blue lapis lazuli, Afghanistan.



Trilobite with clearly visible multi-faceted compound eyes.

**Birthstones:**  
 Back row: Amethyst; ruby, Madagascar; topaz, Utah.  
 Front row: Aquamarine; green tourmaline, Brazil; opal, Ethiopia; red beryl (red sapphire), Utah; emerald, Colombia; red garnet.

shells come in all different shapes and sizes, some with astonishing detail that can open a window to the prehistoric past. A miniature explorer might have a variety of specimens collected during world travels, or a single specimen, like geodes, from exotic locales. The possibilities are endless and provide a touch of the unusual to your miniature scenes.

**Researching the right pieces**

"I love doing research and finding out more about the items I have, and as I discover new material I keep learning," Wendy enthuses. "I try to share my knowledge of the natural world with other miniaturists and my customers. I have customers worldwide and appreciate the connectivity that comes with sending them

specimens from all over the globe. Most of my sales now are natural history items rather than pillows," although Wendy has clients who avail her of both, coordinating soft-scapes and hard into a cohesive collection. For Wendy the most remarkable aspect of fossil collecting is their natural preservation, surviving millions of years and still revealing incredible detail. Her tiny trilobites



from Morocco can still display their multi-faceted compound eyes.

Ammonites may have traces of shell or reveal lovely and intricate shell sutures.

Most of her specimens speak for themselves or may just require a simple base on which to display them. Her pieces not only work well in 'real life' settings; fantasy vignettes are particularly enhanced by her crystals, fossil teeth, and other oddities. "One of the nice things about the majority of natural history specimens is that they can be seen as both decorative objects d'art and scientific specimens," Wendy points out.

It takes some effort to find pieces appropriate for miniature scales. Wendy travels to local and regional mineral shows and trade shows, and occasionally to bead shows to find unusual mounts. With nature's own variations in size, shape and colour, for many items there is no 'right size'. Since most rock hounds are looking for the biggest and best specimen they can find or afford, Wendy is a stand-out, looking for the minute that others overlook.

Accidents present buying opportunities when, on occasion, a large specimen is dropped and pieces fly. A number of dealers now save Wendy special pieces and she will occasionally buy a larger piece she can break down into several smaller ones. Her shells are bought over the Internet from suppliers all over the world and she spends hours washing and picking fossils out of matrix sent to her by a palaeontologist friend.

"I currently have at least 260 different kinds of minerals and crystals," Wendy says, "and many of those come in a variety of forms and colours, for a total of over 5000 specimens in stock. I have far more specimens than I can post on my website so if a customer is looking for something specific, I often have it."

### Keeping ahead of the market

For years one of the most requested items were miniature geodes and they just weren't available, but recently this has changed and, for the moment, Wendy has a small but select collection of these sparkly treasures, which remain one of her most popular items.

"I have learnt that the supply of specific crystals and minerals changes over time. Mines close or are worked out, a claim holder moves on, prices may fluctuate up and down. So if I see something appealing I try to stockpile a supply as I may not be able to get it again. I'm always on the lookout for the different and new."

Wendy's customers have used her pieces in all sorts of mini settings: studies, libraries, sea captain's offices, period sitting rooms, curiosity shops, beach cottages, and fantasy scenes. Some customers collect their birthstones or buy tiny fossils or rocks to gift to family members with full size collections. One client created an elaborate story about a lady explorer and her treasures.

In addition to her individual items, Wendy fills a small number of high quality display cabinets, glass topped tables, and collection drawers to create ready-made collections. Some even have tiny, readable labels!

With a business that continues to grow, Wendy works around the needs of her family. As for her own miniature projects, in the past twelve years she has yet to complete a single structure! Like explorers and collectors past and present, she's too busy looking for that next treasure to settle down. Maybe in another twelve years! ☞

#### INFORMATION

Wendy's offerings can be seen on her website at [www.wendysminiatures.com](http://www.wendysminiatures.com)  
E: [wsmale@windstream.net](mailto:wsmale@windstream.net)

Assortment of silk pillows shows Wendy's versatility as an artist.



Variety of crystals on a three-tiered, pie-edge table.



Colourful collection of minerals on display cabinet.



Laser cut models of woolly mammoth, tyrannosaurus rex and triceratops; just like the full size ones sold for children to assemble.



Malachite pyramid, quartz crystals, polished rhodochrosite egg, and Japanese seed pearl in a shell.