HARVARD SQUARED

CURIOSITIES: Picking Up a Hobby

William Blake saw “a World in a Grain of Sand.” Stan Munro saw the Taj Mahal in a toothpick—or, more precisely, thousands of toothpicks stuck together with Elmer’s Glue. He also envisioned Stonehenge, the Eiffel Tower, and the International Space Station, and reproduced them, too, along with more than 200 other architectural wonders, at a scale of 1:164 in the basement of his home in North Syracuse, New York.

“We decided these would be very intriguing to see,” says Michael McMillan, associate curator at the Fuller Craft Museum. And so 22 of Munro’s structures, including models of Boston landmarks Trinity Church, Fenway Park, and Hancock Place, will be on display at the Brockton, Massachusetts, museum in Toothpick World: From Sliver to Skyline, starting December 19.

Photographs don’t do the work justice. Adults and children alike, looking for a day trip during school vacation especially, will enjoy seeing these astounding works up close. They are educational—lessons in architecture, engineering, and charm—but they also testify to a capacity for zeal. “We spend a lot of time, whether because of academic gravitas or the stigma attached to ‘craft,’ differentiating between applied arts and fine arts,” says McMillan. “What Stan does gets to the core of what we do at the museum, which is to highlight the power of the handmade. This is an examination of the passion of working with the hands, and it’s done in a successful way that people can relate to.”

Munro has worked as a TV reporter, true-crime writer, and hospital administrator, and has been “toothpicking” (his term) for fun since fifth grade. It became a vocation around 2003, when he was staying home to care for his wife, who had been diagnosed with polycystic kidney-liver disease. She is now doing well—yet toothpicking stuck for Munro, and is now his full-time job. The iconic Basilia de la Sagrada Familia in Barcelona, for example, took him about nine months to construct, but he erected the Washington Monument in one very long day.

He sold his first collection, Toothpick City I—50 of the world’s tallest buildings—to a museum in Spain in 2006; it was later acquired by Ripley’s Believe It or Not!, in Baltimore. He currently has two traveling exhibits—Toothpick City II, which includes Yankee Stadium, Tokyo City Hall, the Queen Mary II, and Burj Al Arab (the luxury hotel in Dubai)—and the larger but equally eclectic Toothpick World. Where else could the Stratosphere Tower (Las Vegas), Grand Mosque (Mecca), and headquarters of MI-6 (London) be corrallled? In all, Munro has employed more than four million toothpicks (now bought wholesale), along with untold vats of glue.

“Stan’s used to showing a lot of his work in libraries, more casual places, a bar or a restaurant,” says McMillan, who is excited to widen the audience for fine folk art. “When he came here to visit, he looked around and said, ‘Oh, this is a real museum.”’

~N.P.B.