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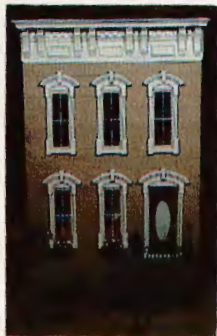




Photos by Dee Snyder

The Gourmet Who-Done-It

BY DEE SNYDER



IF THERE is a modern American male character who begs to be miniaturized, it is Nero Wolfe. For those who haven't read Rex Stout's stories about the fat detective and his assistant Archie Goodwin or seen him on the short-lived NBC TV series starring William Conrad, he must be explained.

rarely leaves his comfortable turn-of-the-century brownstone on West 35th Street in New York City. A gourmand, a prize orchid grower, and an eccentric with very urbane tastes, he works only to maintain his lifestyle. He speaks seven languages, weighs a seventh of a ton, and has seven steps in front of his house. His favorite expression is "pfui."

It is a miniaturist's dream — bringing to life a popular character, locating a set of challenging items, and an excuse to combine contemporary plants, foods, gourmet accessories, Oriental rugs, porcelains, and so on.

For over five years I have been collecting and planning for the project. The number of

Wolfe is a lazy, crime-solving genius who

In his office (top), Wolfe sits in his big brown leather chair at a cherry desk surrounded by his treasures — the non-functioning waterfall picture was actually a peep hole from a kitchen alcove, the familiar yellow arm chair, the safe, red leather chair for clients, dart board for exercise, and his beloved yellow Oriental rug (courtesy of the Keshishian Collection). Dee painted the exterior of her Wolfe house to resemble the one featured on NBC (left).



Due to the small size of this house, Dee didn't have enough space for the "all-important" kitchen. But she still managed to convey the significance of Wolfe's gourmet tastes by zeroing in on a breakfast area where Fritz is busy preparing trout Montbarry. He is surrounded by gleaming copper, blue and white porcelain, beautiful houseplants and a round table covered in — what else — yellow.

Taking certain liberties with this discontinued Magnuson house kit, Dee placed Wolfe's office on the second floor. The entrance hall (right) is only a partial view showing a few elegant furnishings. Wolfe's plant rooms located on the brownstone's roof are represented by a green house with orchid plants and equipment. The living room's accent is on the botanical prints and flowers appreciated by Wolfe.



years does not denote the enormity of the exercise, it is just that Nero was always being put on the back burner. Other Wolfe enthusiasts, knowing my plan, can take credit for goading me to completion. **Virginia Lanham** whose charming French room was featured in Susan Braun's *Miniature Vignettes*, (Scribners, 1975), finished her authentic Wolfe office before me and sent pictures to prove it! **Bunny Ward** came to my stable and stood over me while she painted woodwork, fitted windows, and pleated draperies.

In 1978 when I mentioned in NN that the project was underway, I had settled on a vignette approach by using a then-available brownstone house kit by **Magnuson Models Inc.** (now a division of **W.K. Walthers**), called the Victorian Jewel. It was in 1" scale, made of molded plastic foam and wood, and

measured 27"Hx17"W and was only 6" deep. Instead of all the large important Wolfe details like an elevator, yellow sofa, pool table, and an 8' wide coat rack, I planned to incorporate a smattering of artifacts and articles to create only an impression of a household. Certain liberties were taken.

Translating the written details into an image was helped by the book, *Nero Wolfe of West Thirty Fifth Street* by William S. Baring-Gould (Viking, 1969, and Bantam paperback, 1970). A chapter is devoted to the physical details of the house gleaned from the stories. My first slant was a 1930s household as Wolfe set up housekeeping on West 35th Street about 1930. He loved yellow and had just about everything yellow — sofas, chairs, walls, rugs, shirts and so on. Then the lavish and tasteful sets by Charles Rutherford for

the 1981 television series changed some of my interpretations mid-stream. Paneled walls replaced yellow ones and blue and white porcelains and house plants prevailed. While basically accurate and favoring the 1940s era, the sets were more classic and less dated than what I originally had in mind. People who had never heard of Nero Wolfe were talking about the beauty of the Rutherford rooms.

The project was also helped by watching three Wolfe movies. The first was made in 1936 and starred Edward Arnold. The most recent one featured Thayer David. Some books with useful illustration are *Murder Ink* by Dilys Winn (Workman Press, 1977), and *Great Detectives* by Julian Symons (Harry Abrams, 1981).

The head of the Wolfe figure was sculpted for me by **Corinna Taylor** from a book cover picture. She caught his Slavic good looks and I attached him to a bigger-than-life body in his favorite yellow shirt, dark three-piece suit, and watch chain. Fritz Brenner, his Swiss chef and major domo is played by **Joann McCracken's** baker doll. Archie Goodwin, his secretary and legman, and Theodore Horstmann, the orchid nurse, are still in the wings.

The contents of the house are such a melange that it would surely raise the eyebrows of purists. The furniture carefully chosen to paint the picture ranges from old reworked **Shackman**, kits by **Realife Miniatures**, **Chrysnbon**, and **X-Acto**, to pieces from **Eugene Kupjack**, **Goebel Miniatures**, **Handcraft Designs**, **Petite Princess**, **Masterpiece Miniatures**, the **Summerlots**, and **Joan Blenkinsop**. Ceramics are from **It's A Small World**, **The Singing Tree**, **Deborah**

McKnight, **Lee-Ann Chellis-Wessel**, **Barbara Epstein**, and myself. The books are from the **Realife Library** kit and **Carol Wenk**. The orchids are from **Mary Payne** (Posey Patch Originals) and the **Inch Worm**. House plants and window boxes are by **Imy Kelleher**. The copper and brass pieces are from **Chet Spacher** (pot rack, cane holder, and fern stand), **Harry Littwin** (samovar), **The Kitchen Parlor and Dollhouse** (chafing dish, and colander), and a few pans from a toy store in Paris. There is a Swiss silver fondue pot charm. The foods are English except for a lettuce given me by **Sarah Salisbury** and made by the **Steak Family**. The house is wired with **Illinois Hobbycraft** fixtures.

A quick tour takes us through the entrance hall with its look inspired by the television series — wainscotting, grey damask paper, red Oriental rug (a magazine cut-out), ferns, a grandfather clock and pictures in heavy gold frames. The edited kitchen emphasizes the importance of food artistically prepared and served in impeccable surroundings. In his office, Nero is surrounded by his nearly 3' in diameter globe, his Webster's dictionary, his books (one marked with a counterfeit \$10 bill), the *New York Times*, crossword puzzles, beer, phone, buzzer, and a special orchid. There are a few case mementos such as a gold bottle opener (**Infinity Scale Objects**), red box, chunk of petrified wood used as a murder weapon, and horn-handled letter opener — once a knife thrown at Wolfe.

Why have I not mentioned the rumor that Nero Wolfe is the son of Sherlock Holmes? Pfui! But then this might explain a small picture placed in the shadows behind Wolfe's desk. □

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