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A visit to Tinkertown

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Automata enliven a roadside attraction

by Vance Bass • Albuquerque, New Mexico, USA • Photos and videos by Marc Horovitz except as noted

When you enter a place like the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam, you are overwhelmed by the sheer number and quality of the things you see displayed in a relatively small space. Entering Tinkertown is not exactly the same experience, but it's in the same category. The place is a sensory blast of creativity, color, history, and whimsy.

What is Tinkertown? It's a roadside tourist attraction in Sandia Park, New Mexico (outside Albuquerque), on the road to a ski resort. It's the creation of Ross Ward (1940-2002), a painter, sculptor, creator, and probably insomniac. It's mostly a museum of Ward's miniature tableaux—humorous vignettes from the circus, the Old West, and daily life in a variety of vignettes. All of them have some kind of animated movement, which makes them automata as well as folk art.

Biography and background

Ross Ward credits a visit to Knott's Berry Farm in Los Angeles when he was nine years old, as well as tourist theme parks, with firing up a fascination with the Old West. Back home in South Dakota, he and a friend began building their own Old West ghost town from cardboard boxes, produce crates, and the



Tinkertown's extensive circus. There are several acts under way in the big top, while the circus band is seen in front on its bandwagon. —Photo: Vance Bass



A band makes too much noise for a nearby neighbor who, looking out of her window, protests.

construction toy known as Lincoln Logs. They populated the place with lead cowboys and Indians, and made many of their own figures from modeling clay. They haunted the public library for books and magazine articles about the West. Ward's practice of recycling wood and metal for his creations set the stage for Tinkertown.

In 1952, Ward began carving figures from wood, and creating a miniature circus. The circus eventually grew to 35 wagons and five tents, populated by metal and plastic toy animals, his own carved figures, and painted clay people. Some of those early wagons and figures still live in Tinkertown's circus diorama.

After high school, Ross exhibited his circus in a local tourist attraction in the Black Hills of South Dakota, which gave him a more mature understanding of the roadside tourist business. That information would prove useful later on. Drafted into the US Army in 1962, he



An early southwestern trading post deals in Native American items.

spent his down time carving figures for the first Old Country Store diorama.

After his army service, Ward got a job at a sign company in Phoenix, where he honed his craft (and also collected a lot of scrap material with which to make his miniature towns after work). The Western Town grew and grew. Ross eventually ended up traveling across the country, painting signs, murals,

and even merry-go-round horses for circuses and carnivals, while exhibiting his miniature towns.

After settling in New Mexico, he and his wife bought a little house in the mountains, and he began building a bottle wall around it, while planning a permanent home for his miniature creations, which he called Tinkertown. The bottle wall eventually



Action at the Chinese laundry and restaurant.

contained over 50,000 bottles, and the five-room house expanded to a 22-room museum. Ward's carvings, dioramas,

collections, and paintings finally had a permanent home.

Ward died in 2002 from Alzheimer's

Disease. His wife Carla and a dedicated staff of enthusiasts have kept Tinkertown running ever since.



The Grandmother Fortune Teller by the Munves Company of New York was built in 1940.

The miniatures

Ross Ward's miniatures, which he created from age nine until he could create no more, fill the narrow, winding halls of the museum. They reside in glass-fronted displays, mounted at waist height, often with electrical buttons



Vanteen the Magician, surrounded by paraphernalia, pulls a rabbit out of his hat.

that visitors can push to start the animations. The animations are usually simple, but always charming: a cook chasing a chicken, a silversmith hammering a piece of jewelry, an acrobat swinging on a trapeze. Others are more sophisticated, like a girl jumping a rope,

hopping over the rope as it twirls over her head and under her feet. While each animation is simple, the sheer quantity and quality make for an impressive experience.

The series of Western town scenes are especially interesting, and are good examples



7. Some of the bottle walls that help to define Tinkertown.



Part of a sign advertising Tinkertown, painted by Ross Ward.
—Photo: Vance Bass

of naïve or “outsider” art (art made by self-taught, highly creative people). Few outsider artists venture into adding motion to their creations, but the fact that Ward’s scenes include animations puts them firmly in the realm of automata. (See also “Visiting the Boyer Museum,” *Automata Magazine*, Jan-Feb 2019.)

Other memorable scenes include an angel and a devil fighting over the soul of a dead man, while below an undertaker shuts a coffin lid and two skeletons play on a swing. Carpenters hammer nails on the roof of a house, while their coworkers drill and saw planks below. A hillbilly band mimes a Bob Wills song while a neighbor slams her window in protest. A saloon is full of frantic drinkers who keep a barmaid hopping. In all, Tinkertown contains over 1,500 hand-carved and painted figures in animated scenes.

The centerpiece of the museum, however, is the circus, an enormous display (approximately 10 x 20 feet, or 3 x 6m). It’s a mélange of handmade items mixed with bought or found pieces, under a huge circus



The front of a circus wagon painted by Ross Ward. —Photo: Vance Bass

LINKS

Video of the Tinkertown Circus: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n7dfyTvfPWY>

Other Tinkertown action: <https://www.youtube.com/shorts/Bpk2rIFHAEA>

To see all of this issue's videos in one place, [click here](#)

tent, with multiple acts being performed at the same time. The three-ring circus display includes hundreds of pieces, including a half dozen different animated scenes among the wagons and animal cages.

In addition to Ward's animated miniatures, there are collections of interesting things (e.g. "bullet pencils") and similar displays, like the 1940 fortune-teller booth, an English "snake charmer" booth from the seaside resort of Blackpool, England, or an antique mechanical orchestra. There is the front of a circus wagon, painted by Ward, near the circus big top. Fascinating and puzzling collections of items are everywhere.

What ties it all together

Tinkertown could be labeled a visual jumble, a place without a single clear focus. The sheer number of things Ward created and collected tends to overshadow the circus display, for example. But that would miss the point of the place, which is rampant eclecticism. It is one of the last of the naïve roadside attractions, a place in which the memories of all the tourist towns and carnivals where Ross Ward worked, all over the United States, are gathered together. The place is colorful and infinitely detailed, and the animations put the spark of life into each of the tableaux.

Ward painted a sign seen near the entrance to Tinkertown: "I did all this while you were watching TV." It's a fitting slogan for a creative mind that could not sit still—always on the move, just like his circus and Western towns. 