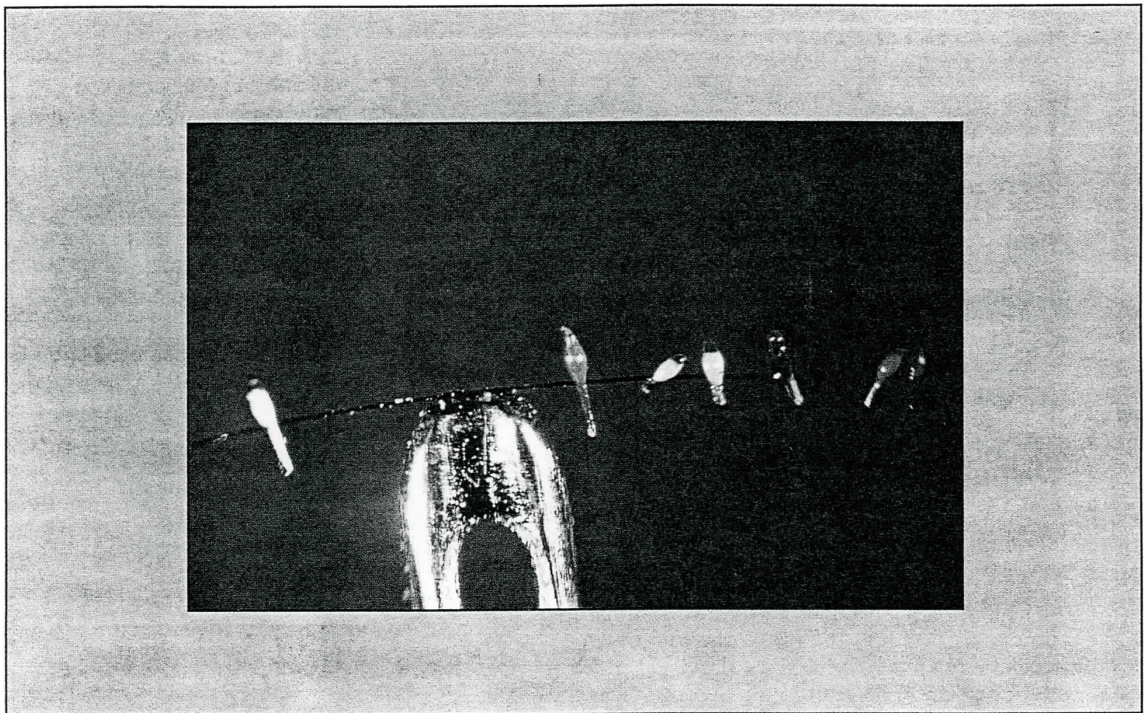


Miniature Collector

The Invisible Art of Hagop Sandaldjian

By Virginia Chase Sanderson



Photos courtesy of Museum of Jurassic Technology

Amark features birds perched on a baby's hair.

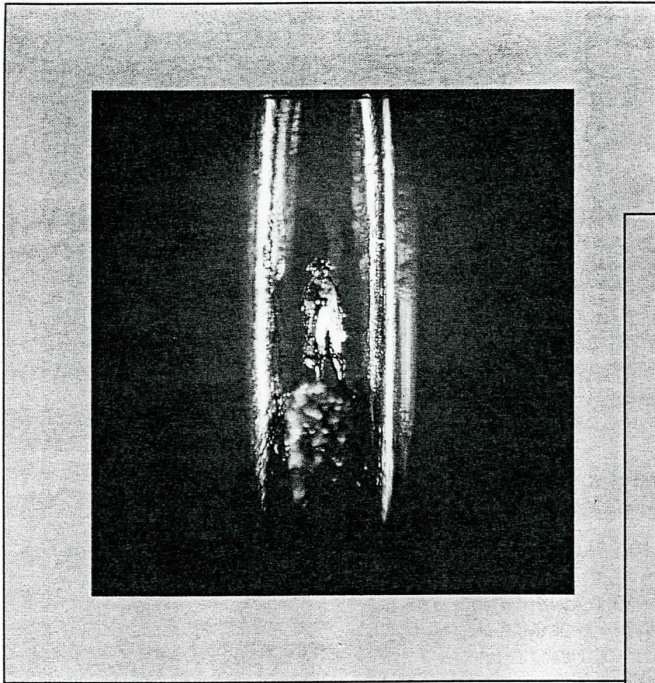
He worked in the middle of the night, because only then was the family asleep, only then was there no vibration from road traffic outside, only then had the dust settled, the dust that was his mortal enemy. I like to imagine the quiet of that workshop at night, the stillness that wraps about the sculptor sitting before his microscope, his hand movements so minute that he seems not to move at all. Even his breath

appears to be suspended.

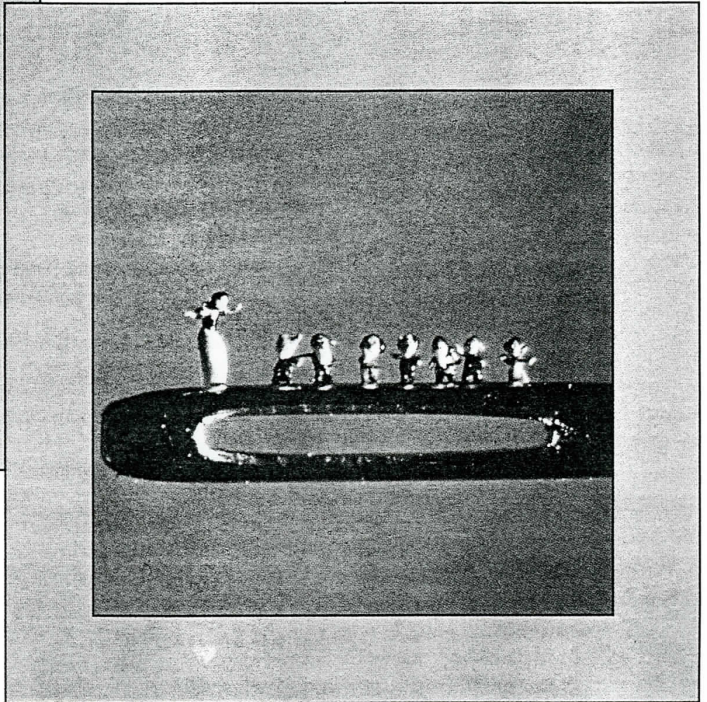
In this painstaking manner, using a 120-power microscope, Hagop Sandaldjian carved and painted exquisitely detailed miniature figures made from human hair and glue. So delicate were the strokes required of his tiny chisel that he studied yoga to learn how to control his breath and heartbeats, for a breath could blow away the work in progress, and the pulse in his wrist could cause his hand to move. His chis-

el was a needle with a speck of diamond dust glued to the tip. His paintbrush was a sharpened human hair.

Sandaldjian produced an astonishing 51 microminiature sculptures in his lifetime, in addition to pursuing his public career as a renowned violinist and violin teacher. When Sandaldjian left Soviet Armenia in 1980, the government seized his entire collection of 18 sculptures, declaring them national treasures. In Los



Napoleon stands on a pedestal in the eye of a needle.

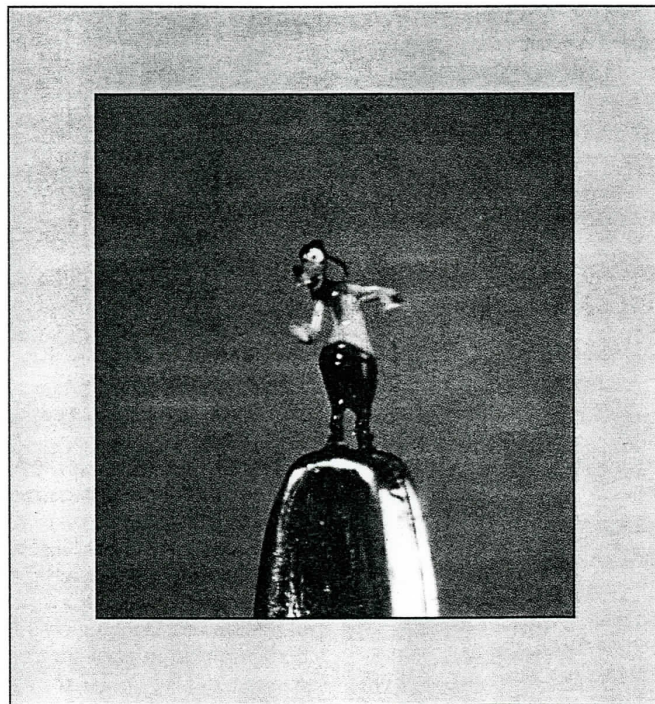


Poised on the horizontal edge of a needle is Hagop's interpretation of Walt Disney's Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs.

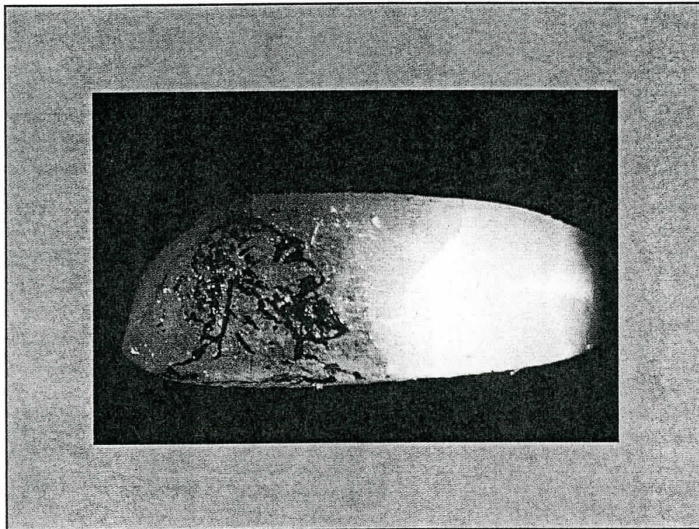
Angeles he produced 33 more. He died in 1990, just before the first museum exhibition of his sculptures in the United States.

The sculptures of Hagop Sandaldjian are on display in the Museum of Jurassic Technology in Culver City, near Los Angeles, California. The museum is dedicated to engendering a state of wonder in its visitors, seeking especially "to bring to a larger audience evidence of human artistry and ingenuity on a microscopic scale," according to its founder, David Wilson. Its exhibits will challenge your assumptions, play with your sense of reality, and confound linear thinking. Enter at your own risk!

As I penetrated deep within its dim maze, I stumbled at last into a small cubicle devoted to the work of Hagop Sandaldjian. Plexiglas® cubes mounted on stands stood about the room, each cube topped with a 25-power lens. I leaned over and peered through the first microscope, to view a sculpture titled *Aramik's Hair*. I thought I knew what to expect, having seen a photograph of the sculpture, but I still was not prepared for my first sight of the real thing. "It's not possible!" I gasped.

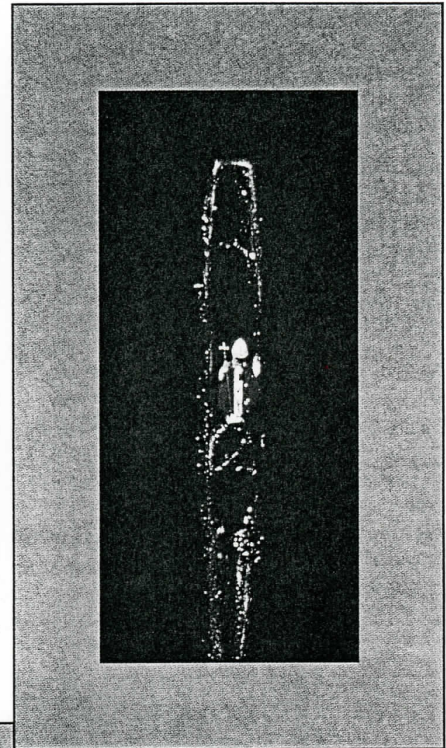


"Goofy" stands tall atop the needle's eye.



Hagop's portrait of Mesrob Mashtots on a grain of rice recognizes the creator of the Armenian alphabet.

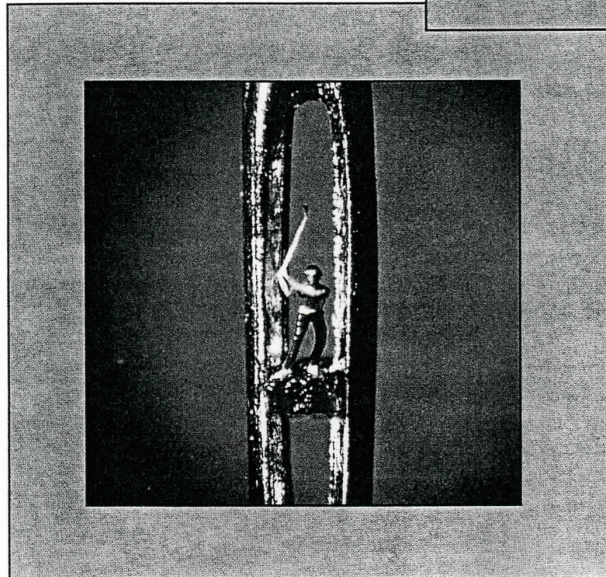
Pope John Paul II raises his hands in blessing from the center of a needle's eye.



Photos courtesy of Museum of Jurassic Technology

I was looking at a row of birds on a wire suspended over the eye of a needle. The delicate sharpness of detail was indescribable. The birds were beautifully modeled and painted, and, according to the audio program, they were standing on a thread of baby hair from the head of Hagop's grandson. Could this whole thing be a hoax? I wasn't the first person to hold this suspicion, but my nearsightedness came to my rescue.

The Plexiglas display case held the answer. If you peered sideways into the display case, you saw an ordinary needle, and not a very big one at that. If you squinted closely, you could see a fine hair suspended over the eye of the needle, a curved hair not much longer than an eyelash, but much thinner. And if you squinted even harder, you could just make out little dark specks on that almost invisible hair. If you counted the specks, you had to acknowledge that they were the birds.



Hagop captures a golfer mid-swing.

Impossible! Yet there was the proof: I could see with my naked eye that there was no chicanery here.

The next cube held a sculpture titled *Habanera*. Through the microscope I gazed at a Spanish dancer in red, dancing on a tiny platform mounted inside the eye of a needle. Again, if I peered with my naked eye into the side of the case, I could see the nee-

dle, and within its eye, a little red dot—yes, confound it, there was no denying it: Hagop Sandaldjian had created figures that were all but impossible to see with the naked eye.

By this time I was practically dancing myself. I hadn't felt this way since I was a child! So it was for this that he had done it, to return to world-weary adults a moment of childhood, a moment

back again in a world shrouded in unfathomable mystery on all sides. I sat down to recover on a nearby bench, as other visitors drifted in to encounter the work of Hagop Sandaldjian.

"No way!"

"How in the world?!"

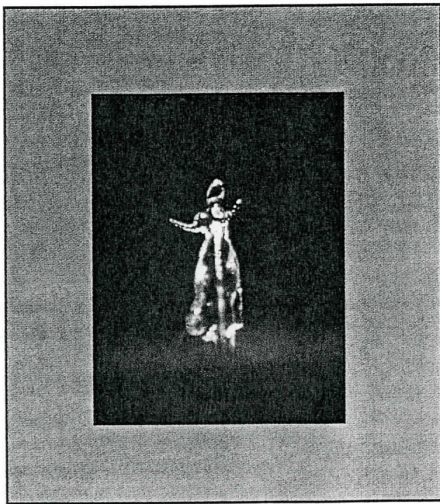
"This is mad."

"It's cool—look at it!"

"Strange thing to want to do."

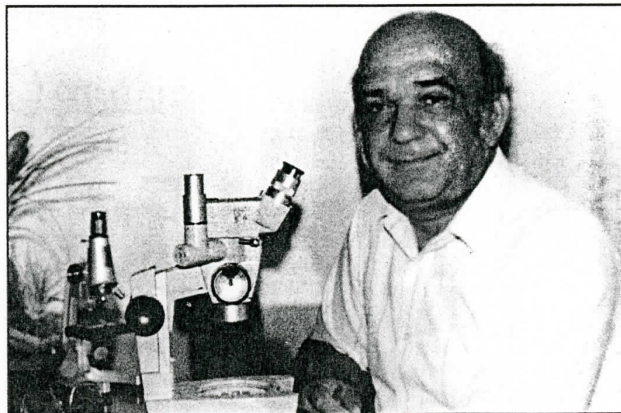
Perhaps the strangest thing of all is that Hagop Sandaldjian's

Courtesy of Museum of Jurassic Technology



Cio-Cio San, a tribute to Puccini's *Madame Butterfly*, dances on one of Hagop's own white hairs.

techniques and tools were part of a tradition long known and available to him. In Eastern Europe, microministry is no new thing. It dates back past the discovery of the microscope in the early seventeenth century, to the days of religious persecution, when precious manuscripts were miniaturized to keep them from discovery.



Hagop Sandaldjian at his microscope.

When I visited Hagop Sandaldjian's widow, Venera, and his daughter, Siranush, I asked them what drove him to this mad pursuit. The challenge, they felt. It was tough to do! He would emerge tired and agitated from his nightly bouts, eyes and face red. Each sculpture presented unique difficulties, and frustrations abounded. A sculpture could be damaged by a tiny slip, or a dust particle could hit one of his minute sculptures and send it skittering to the floor, to be lost forever in the floorboards. Once he sneezed, and lost a tiny ballerina. He hunt-

ed for her on hands and knees for weeks, but soon learned that once lost, a sculpture was unrecoverable. This pursuit was nevertheless his greatest joy, this patient penetration of a minute sphere almost as inaccessible as outer space. Sandaldjian's family and violin students still remember the limitless patience of this passionate man. ■

Virginia Sanderson, a retired college instructor, is living the "life she dreamed of," spending mornings writing and afternoons producing miniatures. Virginia's home is in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

A Visit to the Museum of Jurassic Technology

The Museum of Jurassic Technology is a modest storefront in Culver City, California. This small natural history museum, with its emphasis on oddities and innovations, is a throwback to the earliest museums—the *Wunderkammern* or chambers of wonders, as they were called. Of special interest to miniature enthusiasts is the museum's current exhibit of Dalton slides, a nineteenth-century craze in which tiny mosaic floral arrangements that can only be seen under a microscope were created from diatoms and the scales from butterfly wings. And don't miss the 30-minute film,

Levsha, featuring microminaturist Nikolai Syadrity, shown in the museum's new 16-seat theater.

For a vicarious trip to the museum, read Lawrence Weschler's Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *Mr. Wilson's Cabinet of Wonder* (Pantheon, 1995). For more about Sandaldjian, read *The Eye of the Needle: the Unique World of Microminiatures of Hagop Sandaldjian*, by Ralph Rugoff (Museum of Jurassic Technology, 1990). Also available from the museum is a View-Master™ reel offering three-dimensional views of Sandaldjian's sculptures. The museum is at 9341 Venice Boulevard, Culver City, California 90232-2621; 310-836-6131.



Photo by Virginia Sanderson