



# A World in THE PALM OF Your Hands

Dina Brodsky captures stirring landscapes in a pocket-sized format.

By Ani Kodjabasheva

While studying abroad in Amsterdam, Dina Brodsky lived in an abandoned building without any heat. She spent a lot of time at the Rijksmuseum, drawn to both the art and the warmth. For two or three months, she went there every day. Her “first love” was the 17th-century Dutch still lifes, with their brightly colored fruit and gleaming vessels. After that, she was drawn to the Netherlandish van Eyck brothers (Jan, 1390–1441, and Hubert, 1370–1426) and their obsession with precise detail. “They were less into harmony than into going all the way to the end of something—to that last pearl. It’s a perfect pearl or a perfect mirror,” she says.

Rembrandt’s monumental painting *The Night Watch* (about 12x14 feet), on the other hand, didn’t resonate with Brodsky. “It’s just so big that I’m overwhelmed by it,” she says. The painting is almost life-size, and the figures are positioned to look as if they might step out of the picture plane, but Brodsky was unable to enter that fictional

space. “Artwork affects me more when it’s small,” she says, “when I can take in the whole thing rather than having to stand back.”

## TOTAL IMMERSION

Here’s the paradox: Rather than creating a convincing illusion that draws in a viewer, paintings close to life-size are perceived as images of something outside the viewer’s world. No matter how realistic those images are, a viewer clearly juxtaposes them as separate entities within real-life physical space. In other words, there remains an acknowledged difference between the viewer’s world and the image-world.

Miniatures, on the other hand, don’t demand comparison; instead, they demand immersion into a world of their own with its own scale and space. The difference is similar to that between overhearing a conversation, aware you’re only a spectator, and being lost in a book or a dream in which the story feels like your own.

## OPPOSITE

From **Cycling Guide to Lilliput series** (oil on copper, 2½-inches diameter each): first row, left to right: **No. 52, No. 55, No. 97**; second row, left to right: **No. 99, No. 98, No. 96**; third row, left to right: **No. 89, No. 88, No. 81**; fourth row, left to right: **No. 71, No. 59, No. 100**





Brodsky holds her piece, **No. 53 (Cycling Guide to Lilliput series)**; oil on copper, 2½ inches diameter) against the real-world scene upon which it's based.

## MAKING MINIATURES

Brodsky clearly prefers the immersive experience. She has been fond of small things since she was a child, and as an adult, she has gathered a substantial following on social media by showing her palm-sized miniatures and her process for creating them. These paintings take the viewer to all kinds of scenes: golden sunsets and sunrises; ocean shores; woodland groves; unpeopled paths, walks and lanes; and so much more (see the above photo and images on pages 66 and 70).

Each of the landscapes is part of a miniature series *Cycling Guide to Lilliput*. A long-distance cyclist since age 18, Brodsky finds that bicycling is her preferred mode of travel, and she has enjoyed several cycling sojourns in Europe. Combining two of her interests, the artist records special memories of her travels in this series of tiny paintings, which measure a mere 2½ inches in diameter.

"When painting miniatures, I have the feeling I'm totally in the space of the painting,"

says Brodsky. "I sit down to work, and when I get up six hours later, I feel like I'm cut off—as if I'm dipping out of the miniature world into the real world, but my home is where the miniatures are."

To create those little portals to other places, the artist draws the composition directly on the surface—either copper plate or mylar. She then tones the surface with acrylic and lets it dry. After that, she begins building up layers of oil paint, followed by glazing. She then paints the finer details and reglazes, applying as many as 10 layers as she deepens the color and develops the details.

Making miniatures is an accessible artistic practice in the sense that it doesn't take much physical space—certainly not a full studio. Brodsky points out that she can create these pieces while sitting on the corner of her couch—and that an entire "museum" for miniatures could fit into a structure about the size of a cabinet.

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—DINA BRODSKY



## BOOKS AS ART

Before studying art, books were the main outlet for Brodsky's imagination. Although she had little interest in schoolwork, she lost herself in fiction. Illuminated manuscripts from Christian and Islamic traditions are another literary art form that has long fascinated her. The artist marvels at the details and idiosyncrasies of these pages that invite close examination.

Brodsky remarks that developing a full appreciation for such tactile, intricate work can be difficult in today's world. She points out that most people can't even get a proper look at the manuscripts. "You see one page of the book in a museum, and you don't see anything else," she says. "That one page is a work for which someone spent an insane amount of time and skill—but imagine being able to leaf through all the pages of those books. Every single page is a work of art." These books were treasures to their readers—objects with which they had a personal relationship. Like Brodsky's miniatures, they invite prolonged contemplation.

In a similar vein, Brodsky's sketchbooks, which she has kept since her college days as a means of recording her life's itinerary, encourage the lingering gaze. Like an enchanted storybook, her recent sketchbook pages take the viewer along forested paths of collected memories. She paints a scene and then, giving small things their due, picks out a specific object for study. A trompe-l'oeil dandelion or leaf stands out as if it's an actual herbarium specimen placed on top of a painted landscape (see *Jamaica Pond*, above left, and *Cemetery*, above middle). In another sketchbook, trompe-l'oeil ladybugs with unbelievably glossy, sturdy wings crawl across the paper and over the painted sky of an underlying scene (See *Mt. Auburn*, above right.)

"It's funny," says Brodsky, "I think we don't change that much from the time we're young. I've always liked books, and I've always liked small things. The fun part of being an adult is that I actually get to make the stuff that I used to just look at."

LEFT TO RIGHT  
**Jamaica Pond**  
(Emerald Necklace Conservancy, Boston; gouache, watercolor and ballpoint pen on journal page, 11x9)

**Cemetery** (Mexico; gouache, watercolor and ballpoint pen on journal page, 11x9)

**Mt. Auburn**,  
(gouache, watercolor and ballpoint pen on journal page, 11x9)





## CHALLENGES OF GOING SMALL

Asked whether she'd recommend other artists try working on a smaller scale, Brodsky hesitates and acknowledges there are drawbacks. "Galleries don't like small paintings," says Brodsky. "Artists would spend a lot of time learning something impractical for which there's a very limited market."

The artist points out that contemporary galleries haven't necessarily been enthusiastic about showing her work, and some have even asked whether she could do similar paintings—but bigger. "The way we're taught now is that if it's bigger, it's better because it can sell for a lot more money," she says.

There are alternatives, however, to galleries. Not finding a rewarding place for herself in the contemporary art world of New York City, where she has been based for most of her career, Brodsky discovered she could get an audience and support somewhere else—on social media.

Instagram turned out to be a suitable platform that advanced Brodsky's career. Seeing her paintings on pocket-sized phone screens enabled viewers to experience a more personalized, even tactile, relationship with the art. In an episode of the podcast *Create!*, Brodsky explains that visits to artists' social media pages resemble studio visits: They're opportunities to learn about artists' processes and get glimpses of their everyday life. This relationship allows web viewers a chance not only to enter Brodsky's real world, but also the worlds of her miniatures. She now has more than 730,000 followers on Instagram.

## PAINT ANYWAY

In spite of the challenges, Brodsky feels there's an argument for following your own course regardless of current trends. In the 2010s, she and a group of friends in New York formed a small art movement called "Paint Anyway." They set their own standards of art-making in order to differentiate themselves from what they were seeing in the Chelsea galleries. The movement had one principle: to make art that's both skilled and heartfelt—to do what feels true to you and to "paint anyway."

"We felt that a lot of what was going on at the time was very ironic or not in earnest—and much of it wasn't skilled, either," says Brodsky. "For us, making something good, as well as having an intent or an idea behind it, was important. Artists

should mean what they're doing and not be embarrassed about having feelings—not need to be ironic."

The group wanted to organize shows in various places. "We were trying to create our own art world because we couldn't find a space in the established one," Brodsky says. The movement has mainly brought about personal growth rather than broader changes; however, Brodsky says that she's now seeing more openness and variety in contemporary galleries—more of the kind of work she values.

## THE DREAM SPACE

In an effort to raise awareness and acceptance of miniature art, Brodsky has teamed with artist Lorraine Loots, a miniaturist from South Africa, on a project to create a "miniature museum"—a small structure in a public space in New York where miniaturists can exhibit their work to a wide audience. Instead letting their work get lost in a space meant for showing big work, they could display their work in a smaller space meant for showing exactly the kind of work miniaturists make.

With her verve and drive to create new realities, Brodsky says, "If it doesn't exist, let's make it."

*Ani Kodjabasheva is a writer living in Sofia, Bulgaria.*

## MEET THE ARTIST



Dina Brodsky studied at the Amsterdam Academy of Arts, in the Netherlands, and went on to receive a BFA from the University of Massachusetts, in Amherst, and an MFA from the New York Academy of Art, in New York City. In addition to her own workshops, she has taught at several institutions, including Castle Hill Center for the Arts, in Cape Cod; the Long Island Academy of Fine Art; and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Brodsky has exhibited her work in London and across the United States.

► VISIT BRODSKY'S WEBSITE AT [DINABRODSKY.COM](http://DINABRODSKY.COM) AND HER INSTAGRAM ACCOUNT @DINABRODSKY.

### OPPOSITE

From the **Cycling Guide to Lilliput series** (oil on copper, 2½-inches diameter each): first row, left to right: **No. 69, No. 68, No. 86**; second row, left to right: **No. 56, No. 57, No. 83**; third row, left to right: **No. 95, No. 65, No. 53**; fourth row, left to right: **No. 63, No. 94, No. 79**