Over twenty years ago I made my first pilgrimage to the tomb of the original “whirling dervish,” the thirteenth century Muslim mystical poet Jalal ad-Din Rumi, in Konya, Turkey. As I walked toward the entry to the burial places of Rumi and his successors in the Mevlevi Sufi order, I passed between two free-standing columns. The slender fluted shafts were unremarkable in themselves, but the tiny burden they bore intrigued me instantly. Atop each stood a small replica, complete with green tile cladding, of the conical cupola that marks the grave of Rumi himself (fig. 1, right center). Why were they there? Surely not to indicate to visitors that if they seek Rumi’s tomb, they have come to the right place, for the actual cupola is a prominent enough feature on the Konya skyline. That day commenced my growing fascination with the virtually ubiquitous presence of miniature sacred structures in religious settings.

Architectural miniatures are not incidental decoration, no mere miscellany of knickknacks on sale in religious goods stores or in the souvenir stalls that pop up like mushrooms around places of popular religious interest. Miniaturized architecture plays a noteworthy role in the ritual life of every major religious tradition. Scholars have produced some studies of individual items, such as the Jewish “spice tower” and the miniature Buddhist stupa, but I know of no attempt to address the topic comprehensively, systematically and comparatively. In order to situate the phenomenon within a broader framework of inquiry, I will discuss it in the context of a typology of ritual object.

The subject is far too vast to be encompassed in a brief paper. My intent here is to outline both work in progress and avenues for further investigation. I have deliberately opted for a broad overview rather than a detailed study of one or two examples of architectural miniature as ritual object. Bearing in mind the enormity of this topic, I will suggest ways of addressing the following questions, relating each to specific examples: What are the sources of architectural imagery in religious ritual objects? Why has architectural imagery exercised such enormous fascination as a concomitant to ritual? What are the principal functions of architectural imagery within or on these ritual objects? Do various religious traditions have truly distinctive...
1. Models of Jalal ad-Din Rumi's tomb, courtyard of sixteenth century Ottoman Turkish mosque, Konya, Turkey.