From Sweet Stuff to Steampunk – Welcome to the Zoo

by Pam North

Steampunk - what is it? A subgenre of science fiction and/or fantasy incorporating technology and aesthetic designs inspired by 19th-century industrial steam-powered machinery, it's a world that Pam Pontious loves, and in it she has found her own unique and creative niche. Steampunk has evolved into an aesthetic of its own, based on elements incorporating anything old, rusty, or mechanical, and it has its own subculture that breathes new life into obsolete items by recycling them into new crafts, incorporating things such as airships, submarines, strange machinery, inventions, and science - all tweaked with a funky, tongue-in-cheek twist. Pam elaborates: “My steampunk animals are anthropomorphic, and any gears or objects used as accessories must appear as if they will actually work. Gears on costumes should seem to have a function; goggles should be worn only when they fit the persona of the wearer, such as a mad scientist or an airship pilot, and so on.”

Pam calls the Pacific Northwest home, and shares her life with a husband and two beloved cats. Her husband, James, is a strong supporter of her artistic efforts, often appropriating her prototypes for himself and not returning them. He swiped her first small 6” bear, named Harry, and shared him with his co-workers, who also delighted in having the small bear around on a regular basis. Harry the bear, now a bit balder and soiled from affectionate caresses and riding around in her husband's pocket for seven years, has finally returned to a place of honor in her husband's home office after his retirement. James also took her first rat to work, showing it to all in his office, even one who claimed to have a fear of rodents. A few days later, he took one of Pam's itsy-bitsy mice to work. When the rodent-shy co-worker glimpsed the mouse cupped in his hand, she almost lost it until she realized that it was one of Pam's creations!

Steampunk is a shared interest for the couple. “My husband and I have dressed up and attended steampunk events for about 5 years, and we are active members of the local steampunk society.” Pam says. “For me, steampunk is a natural artistic outlet to express my creativity, and the results are anthropomorphic representations of steampunk characters: a speedster rabbit on a steam-powered roller skate; a rat lab assistant or mad scientist lion with prosthetics; an elephant adventurer with a prosthetic trunk; a rooster airship pilot; or itsy-bitsy mechanical flying mice (non-flying, but looking like they could).”

Crafts have always been a part of her life, even as a child. Her mom sewed and knitted, and she taught Pam to sew as soon as she could hold a needle. Her dad liked model railroading; he made models, everything from buildings for their HO railroad layout to sailing ships. Pam shared his interest in model railroading, and stayed involved with that for many years. While she often enjoyed helping in her parents' projects, she eventually had to do her own thing. “I made various stuffed creatures from patterns, and then after college I started to make stuffed animals as gifts for friends’ new babies, using patterns that I altered or originated to fit my own concepts. Teddy bears were always included among the various animals I created, but I really focused on them after I stumbled on copies of teddy bear magazines at a local bookstore in 1986. A Seattle teddy bear convention was advertised in both magazines, and I decided to attend the event. It was there that I discovered mohair, glass eyes, joints, and all the other ingredients essential to creating wonderful bears, and I was on my way. The next year, I officially started my business with the name that my husband suggested: Pamda Bears.”

Pam makes her one-of-a kind creations using mohair, and realistic faux furs. Blown glass eyes, antique shoe buttons or onyx black beads contribute to the sassy and endearing expressions she works so hard to attain. She explains her efforts, “Faces are the main focus of each of my creations, because they convey the life and attitude of the character, and I often rework it until I get it right, often moving the head to an entirely new body or making a completely new head.” In addition to bears, her repertoire of animals has included elephants, rabbits, rats, birds, and other delightful creatures. Many of them incorporate the steampunk genre into their design; others are innocently sweet. She uses Loc-Line or wire armatures within the bodies for poseability, and recently took some wire-wrapping jewelry classes to help her create various prosthetics for the steam punk characters. She prefers bonsai wire, which comes in various sizes, is extremely flexible, and doesn't oxidize, and she uses this wire as armatures in her smaller creatures. She prefers to create her animals in a 10” to 12” size range, but has sometimes made them as small as 5” or as large as 23”. “Making clothing isn't my thing so much, so most of my characters either are not dressed, or they have very simple clothing. I have to be careful with feathers, as my cat loves to chew on them, so the best time to work with them is when he is napping in another room. I also like to create one-of-a-kind pieces, as that keeps my designs fresh. Sometimes I do a series of one particular animal, such as a lion, but each one will be unique and different.”

Pam has no problem being creative. “I keep scratch paper around to sketch out new ideas, because If I don’t write them down at the time of conception, I tend to forget them, especially if accessories are required. The papers accumulate and sit there in a pile for several months until I get time and motivation to look through them. The bunny on the roller skate, and the lab rat, are examples of this, primarily because it took time to find the old roller skates and vintage Pyrex test tubes that were essential to their costumes. My bear making at first had to take a back seat to the work schedule of my job as a systems analyst/consultant; that was about ten years of often being on the road. My retirement from that career in 2014 has freed me to delve into that stack of sketches and develop those ideas. It has been interesting to look at some of my older creations and see how much I have evolved through 28 years of critter creation. My first mohair bear looks a little strange to me now!”

“My goal is to create through my artistry unique, special characters that make people smile, bringing fun and lightness into their lives. Laughter should be a major component in life, and my critters reflect that, never taking themselves too seriously.”

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