Creating Dolls the Wright Way

by Pam North

 It's as if all the characters of fairyland and storybooks magically came to life. So many of them are represented, a virtual parade of diverse characters and charming personalities from beloved books and films, all artfully crafted to capture the pure essence that made them so absolutely iconic. This is the enchanting world of famed R. John Wright Dolls, Inc.
 Things have had a way of falling into place for R. John Wright. A photograph in a doll book showing early Steiff dolls; marriage to a partner, Susan, who shared his artistic background; his layoff from a job as a store clerk in 1976 – all were catalysts to what was to come. Wright, inspired by the photograph, fashioned his first doll from some handy yellow flannel, sheep wool stuffing, exterior joints, and button eyes, and despite its simplicity, the potential of what he had created motivated him to continue. Improvements in his design led to rising demand for his dolls and growing sales. Susan began to assist in the venture, and as a team they researched ways to continue to develop better designs, details, and construction of the dolls. Molded felt techniques, historically utilized by doll manufacturers such as Kathe Kruse and Lenci, were mastered and adapted to their own brand of creativity. The enterprise, still housed in their small apartment, grew, requiring employment of assistants. The increasing sophistication and quality of the dolls led to awards at prestigious New England craft shows, and collectors eagerly sought to acquire the dolls for their own. The 1980s brought a relocation of their residence from Bennington, Vermont to Cambridge, New York, and a subsequent separation of the doll operation into an industrial building. Specialized machinery was developed to help the Wrights meet the increasing demand for their dolls. The original character doll designs underwent a dynamic evolution. A collaboration with the Walt Disney Company led first to a line of Winnie-the-Pooh characters, exhibited at the 1985 National Toy Fair in New York City, and then segued into other dolls depicting Disney fairy tale characters. Still the variety expanded over the next few years, and R. John Wright Dolls, Inc. relocated back to Bennington, Vermont. Themes from children's literature were explored: Peter Rabbit, Paddington Bear, Alice in Wonderland, Kewpies, Brownies, Raggedy Ann and Andy, and many more. A series of Steiff Kinder were introduced, a nod to the original Steiff dolls which had so influenced Wright years before. More awards commemorated the doll making achievements of the enterprise, bringing it international status.

 The process for each character's creation is complex and meticulous. Original source material lays the groundwork for each design. A preliminary drawing is made for reference for a preliminary clay sculpture to lay out the contours of the drawing, which is then reproduced in hard modeling wax.

Materials for the dolls and clothing include: all-wool felt, specially treated to be moth proof and colorfast; custom-dyed mohair and plush fabrics; and top grade calfskin of a precise thickness for the handmade shoes. Authenticity is paramount. Strictly numbered editions with signed and numbered certificates, and, since 1987, a tiny brass button intitialed “RJW”. There is a lot of work between making the prototype and getting the doll ready for production. Wright says, “Susan is the critical bridge between design and production. Without her ingenuity the production systems would not be figured out, and without her diligence the production would not measure up to the high standards of the prototype. We have always insisted on having our design and production under one roof. If we didn't produce the dolls here we couldn't keep a strict eye on all aspects to ensure that each doll in the limited edition is kept true to our vision. It's a wonderful little world we live in where we can control everything!”

 When Wright was asked why he was inspired to create dolls, he replied, “In the most basic way, it's the thrill of seeing something envisioned actually become a reality. The fact that this happens to be dolls and animals extends back to my childhood when I was fascinated with toys and loved animals. I've always identified with being creative and everything converged together when I began making dolls. Finding my life-partner in this endeavor sealed the deal! I primarily make the dolls and animals for myself, and hope that there are enough other people out there who share my enthusiasm. They're not for everyone, but for those who love unique, beautifully crafted objects designed in the spirit of childhood and made by hand here in the US, I highly recommend them! The product is made of long-lasting, all-natural materials which have stood the test of time. The themes and characters are classic, and always will have a place in peoples' hearts.” He elaborated on how his products serve his customers. “The first function is to act as a purely-decorative object which also can provide a rich emotional connection. On closer inspection comes an appreciation of the artistry, ingenuity, and careful workmanship that has gone into its creation. Finally, it's worth pointing out that we generally make the 'definitive version' whenever we attempt to do beloved, iconic characters. When someone purchases one of those pieces they can have the satisfaction of knowing that it truly is the very best rendition ever made.”

 So what's next for this illustrious firm? Later this year they will produce the Cowardly Lion for the Wizard of Oz series, and they may produce more Oz characters the next year. Many collectors are hoping that they will do Glinda, and possibly the Wizard of Oz himself. Wright adds, “Next year, we will introduce a new collection of dolls based on the second Alice book, *Through the Looking Glass*. Among the characters will be Humpty Dumpty, Tweedle Dum and Tweedle Dee, and the Frog Footman.” Also projected for release in 2016 are the quirky, enchanting characters from Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are.* First will be Max, 8-inches tall, crafted of 100% wool felt with a custom face mold, black mohair wig, and hand-painted features, with a removable wolf suit, crown, and scepter. Moishe, Bernard, and Tzippy, the beasty Wild Things, will follow; each at approximately 11-inches tall, made entirely of wool felt and plush fabrics, molded hand-painted features, fearsome claws and teeth, airbrushed shading, and leather-covered, hand-painted eyes. Wright promises that when the prototypes are completed, they will look as if they had stepped right out of the famous book illustrations. Photos and information will be posted on the company's website as soon as the characters are available..
 Thanks to the Wrights, it is never too late to have a second, very delightful childhood.

Contact Information:

R. John Wright Dolls, Inc.

2402 West Road – Bennington, VT 05201

Telephone: (802) 447-7072

Email: rjwdolls@aol.com

Website: http://www.rjohnwright.com

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