Animal Portraits Extraordinaire

by Pam North

If a bark were heard, it wouldn't be surprising, although it would be a very tiny one. That's because Cindy-Lou Thompson's miniature dogs look so amazingly lifelike that movement and voice would seem quite possible. More than just a re-creation of pretty creatures, they are so ingeniously crafted that they have individual personalities, which is why pet owners often commission her artistry to immortalize cherished animals in their lives. Thompson is the mastermind behind Chicktin Creations, her business in the UK, and her dogs and other animals are eagerly sought by collectors.   
 Thompson has had a variety of jobs, as a trainer of dogs for security in Barbados, dog behaviorist, dog warden, heavy goods truck driver, and part-time journalist, but she has been a traveler at heart most of her life. After achieving a Bachelor of Arts of Modern Studies degree in Arabic at Leeds University, she backpacked through the Middle East. Then, after meeting her husband eighteen years ago, they converted a truck into a motor home, and drove overland from the UK to Kathmandu and back, a total of 22,366 miles and 18 countries in 12 months. Subsequent to that epic journey, they continued to live in their motor home, working during the summer months in the UK, then traveling around Europe and Africa in the winter months. “In all, we lived and traveled for  
13 years. It was a truly awesome experience, from the people we met, to the many adventures we had.”  
 Unfortunately, Thompson developed serious health issues, forcing them to settle down in the flat lands of Lincolnshire in the UK, in a small cottage that once was the village Sunday school. While recovering from her illness, but still dealing with ongoing medical problems, Thompson sought a diversion from pain. She discovered needle-felting, after chancing upon a short YouTube video clip that featured a Japanese artist creating a cat. “Needle-felting is using a single, barbed needle, and repeatedly jabbing the needle into wool fibers, tangling and compacting them into forming three-dimensional felt sculptures, bound only by one's imagination,” she explained. “From the moment I saw that video I was hooked, and I vowed to master the craft. I am completely self-taught, because I couldn’t find any information about needle-felting in the UK at that time. It took time, along with many mistakes, but luckily I have immense patience. This has been a big learning curve for me, having to work it all out myself. However, I’m pretty determined, and I don’t give up easily. Working with good-quality wool from Germany, I have since developed my own special techniques.” She uses wire armatures for underlying form, blending, applying, and needle-felting wool fibers to complete the animal. Eyes are glass beads (usually black. brown, or sometimes a dark orange), with painted pupils. “The problem with eyes is the exact size, which I don't know until I have completed the basic overall shaping of the head. I'm a bit impatient sometimes, and don't think I could wait a week or more for some taxidermy eyes to arrive in the post! I also have tried making my own eyes from polymer clay, which proved successful.” She previously molded the noses in clay, but now uses her own 'trade-secret' technique, which she developed on her own. “My usual size for the dogs is roughly 10cm at the shoulders. I rarely make them smaller than this, for loss of detail, but larger sizes take far too long. For the mouth parts, I use wire, and three colors of polymer clay. First the gums are created, then the teeth are set, then the tongue and lips. It's a very fiddly and time-consuming process. Polymer clay is a wonderful medium, and has transformed my 'felties'. I love the art of creating my own sculpts and flocking them. The art of flocking takes even longer than needle-felting, and since I make my own sculpts too, the process is a long one. Due to the labor-intensive nature of my craft, I am rather limited in production.” While she specializes in various dog breeds, she will make other animals, and has created horses, cats, wolves, rabbits, birds, mice, foxes, lions, a wart hog, and a pug dog. Her commissions often lead her to previously unexplored creativity.  
 For two-dimensional creations she prefers to use linen as a backing because it is strong and robust enough to take a lot of stabbing, but also uses cotton. The finished pieces tend to fit into her 20cm embroidery hoops. “The material is set in the hoop, then the hoop is backed onto some foam, which is taken away when completed. I don't like to frame them, as people's choices are so vast, so I let them choose their own frames.”  
 Asked why she is so fascinated with dogs, Thompson replied, “My parents had a very large business with dogs. We bred and showed Irish Wolfhounds, and also had kennels for boarding and for security dog training, a competitive obedience/behavioral dog training club, and even handled the stray dog contract from the surrounding police stations. Back in those days, if a stray dog was found, it was taken to the nearest police station; then the police would pay us to keep the dog for 7 days, after which we would try and re-home it. As an only child, I would amuse myself by creating pipe cleaner dogs, coloring and shaping them to create different breeds, then holding pretend dog shows. I use the very same technique today to create the wire frameworks for all my dogs. I always was very artistic and musical at school, and was fortunate to have been privately educated, so my 'artiness' was encouraged.”  
 Inspiration is always a paramount factor for artists. “What inspires me? That’s really difficult. I’m a realist at heart, and like factual things. The thought of creating something that looks real is very compelling, giving me a real sense of achievement. If I had entered into the world of needle-felting 20 years ago, I probably would have been drawn into the film industry and animation, but of course everything now is mostly computer-generated, with little need for lots of models. I always have been fascinated with taxidermy, too, and for me needle-felting is the next best thing. without all the mess! Coupled with polymer clay, and various glues and sealants, needle-felting can achieve wonderfully realistic results.”  
 Thompson's dedication has paid off; she has sold her creations to 15 countries so far, and even created works for a few famous people. She has been featured in many magazines in the UK, Australia, and around the world, and she won the TOBY Industry’s Choice, and then the 2016 TOBY People’s Choice and TOBY Artist of the Year awards. She also won First Place for Hand-Felted Sculptural Form and Best Overall Exhibit in Hand-Felting in Australia's 2016 Royal Adelaide Show. “I am very grateful for all those people who voted for me, and would like to thank everyone!”  
 The future intrigues her. “Who knows it holds for me? I never expected to get this far, but I am hoping to accomplish still more.” She plans to write a “how to” book about needle-felting realistic breeds of dogs.

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