

A Portrait of the Artist

Kathy Patterson

Maker of English Woodens

By
Laurie Baker

A few years ago, when a friend asked me if I had seen dolls made by Kathy Patterson, I confessed that I hadn't; but then I visited Kathy's website, *Babes from the Woods.com*. Be advised if you do likewise, allow over an hour for just a quick browse, and allow time for many visits thereafter. Kathy has been hand-carving English wooden dolls and expertly dressing them, for over thirteen years. Discovering Kathy was an epiphany for me, and for others as well. Her web-counter shows well over 3,800,000 hits!

I knew little about English wooden antique dolls. I had seen a few in auction catalogs but I had no

background in their history or characteristics, so I usually passed them by. I was inspired by Kathy's dolls to learn more. I sought out reference books and began researching these wonderful early dolls.

I realized that an antique English wooden doll would be beyond my means. Kathy's dolls, though, are so true to the antiques that they are often mistaken for antique dolls. One of her dolls would be as close as I would come to owning an English wooden. But often Kathy's are more beautiful than the antiques. Problem solved. I ordered my first doll!



18-inch Queen Anne with fully-removable clothing, 1830's antique cotton



Queen Anne dressed in silk with metallic-thread embroidered stomacher



20-inch Queen Anne with paneled silk skirt



Anne, 16 inches, from the author's collection

Wooden dolls are grouped into three basic categories: William and Mary, Queen Anne, and Georgian. English wooden antique dolls are named for the monarch who ruled at the time of their manufacture. William and Mary dolls date from 1689-1702. Queen Anne dolls, though the term is used loosely to include just about any English wooden

doll, actually date from 1702-1714. The later woodens, Georgians, date from the rule of George I, 1714, through the end of the reign of George III, 1820. Most of the dolls on the market today are actually Georgian, but as you can see, that covers a lot of ground, historically.



Queen Anne Higgs-type dolls, 12 inches and under, with swivel heads

With just enough newfound knowledge, I spent more and more time visiting online at *Babes from the Woods*. I was amazed at the special talents of Kathy Patterson, as she faithfully reproduced these dolls, from their sparse

hair, down to their toes. Her costuming is unparalleled, all done by hand, with tiny stitches so even and perfect, they embody the French term for such talent: *Doigts de fée*, or "Fairy fingers."



Paneled, lined silk jacket and skirt with silk binding

Because her dolls were initially carved from the wood of linden trees (also called basswood) on her forested property in Ontario, Canada, she called her dolls "Babes from the Woods." Kathy carves each one by hand. The head and torso are one piece, with antique glass eyes set into the head.



Pleated cotton Mantua robe



Antique head at right inspired Kathy to make the other two



They have fully-articulated bodies and are carved precisely as the original English wooden dolls, with fork-like hands. Flat, simple feet are clad in cloth slippers so beautifully constructed, you know those "fairies" are at it again! Oh, those shoes!



Fancy silk shoes



Layers of historically-accurate clothing bring the doll to life. Items are most often made from antique fabrics, laces, trims, and whitewear. Some dolls have an elaborate trousseau and accessories - hand-quilted sewing rolls with needlework tools inside; "pockets" to be tied around the waist; pin balls with tiny pins; chatelaines; beaded necklaces or a cross on a chain;

lace caps; flat straw hats with simple trim; a variety of underclothes and bodices, and costumes worthy of a queen.

Kathy's talent and vision are rare in today's throw-away world. I spoke with Kathy by telephone, and she graciously answered questions about her journey for this article. Her responses are paraphrased here, for readability and length, and are not direct quotes.

Did you collect dolls as a child?

Yes. My favorite doll was a 1940's composition doll with a cloth body and composition arms and legs. She was the size of a real baby, and I could dress her in real baby clothes. She was my "go-to" doll.

Who taught you to sew?

My mother sewed Barbie clothes and sold them, when I was young. But I am self-taught. I found if I could visualize something, I could sew it. When I was 12, I babysat for twenty-five cents an hour, then rode my bicycle to the store to buy fabric.

Your costuming is extraordinary. Did you have prior experience in costume design or pattern-making?

All my dolls are individuals, each one unique, so there are no patterns. For each doll, I use paper towels to make pattern pieces. Paper towels are flexible and work well. Originally, wooden dolls were made as clothing models for affluent women. They would be presented with the doll, in her ensemble and with a variety of accessories. They could then order identical ensembles



Sewing roll with pockets, pin cushion, and sewing notions



Georgian pin balls



Chatelaine with pin ball, hare scissors, and purse



Lined jacket showing interior construction



Gentleman's jacket



Back view of dress

for themselves. Other dolls were bought for children, to illustrate and teach about fashion and decorum, and became cherished companions. As time passed, the dolls might have found their way into an attic, or a musty trunk. Their original clothing might not survive, and when someone found the old doll and re-purposed her for a child or other family member she would require a new costume, layer by layer.

It is this "second time around" that intrigues me. When I dress my dolls, I dress them in simpler fabrics. I have asked my clients, "Would you rather have your doll dressed as if she were ready to go to the palace, or

dressed like the woman sewing for the lady going to the palace?" I dress my dolls as the latter.

Do you use a magnifier when you are sewing, due to the tiny and precise stitching?

No, but when I sew, the work is about nine inches from my face. My optometrist was not happy about that. When I went to have a pair of glasses made expressly for sewing, I had to convince him to make them so that they work best for me-- nine inches from the glasses to my sewing work! Not the usual pair of glasses. I often sew for ten to twelve hours a day, and more: I get very involved with my dolls!



Two of Kathy's favorite dolls



Two ladies in conversation



Her coordinating slippers are a perfect fit



Trousseau

You obviously have a deep reverence for antiques and history. Before you made wooden dolls, you made replicas of antique German Belsnickle Santas. How did that start?

I admired my grandmother's antique Christmas decorations, and when I asked for one, she always told me, "You can have one when I'm gone." I decided not to wait. I knew I could make one. And I did.

What led you to begin making English wooden dolls?

I started out, making the reproduction Santas. About a year later, I made a wooden doll. Then Izannah Walker dolls caught my eye. I bought six antique Izannahs and had molds made so I could reproduce them. I made Izannahs for about two-and-a-half years, and then thought I would like to make American oil-painted cloth dolls. But all the while, I was still making woodens. I loved dressing them so much that I began to focus primarily on them. Antique woodens are unique. No two are alike, being individually carved by the dollmaker, while bisque dolls are made using a mold, so many virtually identical dolls can come out of that one mold. With wooden dolls each face is one-of-a-kind. I liked that there is so much room for artistic expression.



Higgs-type swivel head



I had NO experience in carving. I have a dear friend, Annette, who has supported and encouraged me through the years. When she urged me to try my hand at carving, I balked. "I am afraid of kitchen knives! I don't think I could do that." She thought I could. I sat on the porch and "whittled" and practiced. Now I have 43 carving knives and I am entirely self-taught.

When carving the torso, at first it is just a piece of wood. When the face is completed, though, she comes to life and has a personality. I often get so involved working with her, I have to leave the room to clear my head. When I go back to her I say "Oh, there you are!"



In the works

Your dolls have fully articulated arms and legs. What sort of learning process was that?

There are lots of pictures on the internet and in books, that illustrate the old ways of doing this. It just took a little research. The information is out there. (Author's aside: Said like a true artist—if she can visualize it, she can carve it.)

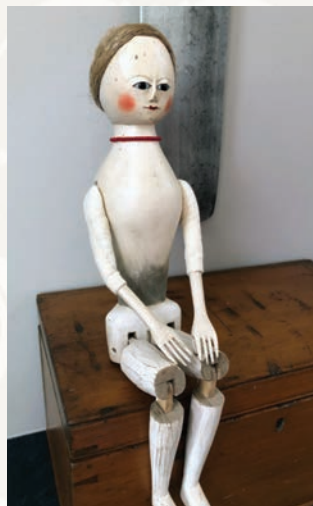


Head with inset antique glass eyes

I always try to do better. I have to be constantly learning, which is one of the reasons I stopped making Santas, for example. There is just one design for a Santa's coat. To make a true Santa reproduction there is little opportunity for variation. I can be more creative with woodens. I am always learning - how to use different products and techniques, with wood and with costuming. I try to do things better as I go along.



"Bella"



Articulated wooden body

Do you sign your dolls?

Every doll, since the very first one, has been signed and dated. I use names that were popular in England at the time of their making. Some clients prefer to use names taken from their personal genealogies, giving their doll the name of an ancestor. I am happy to oblige.



Do you make one doll at a time?

I have several going at a time, at different stages. Some parts of the process require time before I can continue on. I like to have something to do, so I will work on another doll. I like to keep busy. What else would I do?



How long does it take to make a doll, generally?

This depends on the doll's size, and other factors. I usually have about 100-150 hours in each doll.

Do you exhibit at doll shows?

I don't do doll shows, but am active on Facebook, concerning the dolls. I have made many friends and many contacts on Facebook. I have a one-woman business. Most of my clients are repeat customers, and word gets around.



What projects are you currently working on?

I am always working on custom doll orders, which is my first priority. Recently, I started making little dolls, six to seven inches tall, based on dolls from the 1790's. I have named these dolls "Sliver Sisters." They either have little legs, or solid bodies for pin cushions. They are small, fun



Kathy's largest doll, Patience, 36 inches, with Elsey, 22 inches

Your dolls are historically accurate in their detail. Why did you choose this method, rather than taking artistic liberties or modernizing them?

I want my dolls to look as close as possible to the antique originals. The only thing I have done differently is the design of the foot, carving them with the grain of the wood so they would not break off. Prior to that, the feet would break easily.

to carve and dress, and have a whimsical face. People love them. I have quite a following now for undressed dolls as well, and some very talented sewers are having a wonderful time, dressing some of the 18"-and-up dolls.

How many dolls have you been unable to part with, and have kept for yourself?

I have kept no dolls. Not one. But I will tell you that when I get a doll ready to go to her new home, and put her into her box, I feel as if a part of myself is going away. "I could have kept you." But I know where each doll is going, and people send pictures of the doll in her new home. I have good relationships with my clients, and I want to make people happy.

"I am happiest in my studio working on my dolls."



Humility, 33 inches, from the collection of Carolyn Stone.
Ophelia, 31 inches, from the collection of Julie Scott.



Sliver Sisters



Queen Anne wearing early
metallic-silk gown



Sliver Sisters pin cushions,
6 inches

Kathy's dolls are so like the antiques, and so evocative of their time, she has been approached by reenactment groups to make dolls for their events. She made dolls for the remake of "Roots." Making dolls for the film industry is not always possible, though, because they say, "We want your dolls in our movie. We need them in two weeks."

Take a walk back through time, to the late 1600's. A beautifully dressed, fully-articulated wooden doll and



15-inch pair inspired by Lord and Lady Clapham



trousseau arrive at a wealthy household. Whether as a fashion ambassador, or a child's companion, the doll becomes a beloved treasure, and will remain so, through the generations to come.

Today, we are grateful that Kathy Patterson brings her dolls into our homes, reproduced faithfully and with consummate artistry. One thing has not changed. Each doll is still a most-beloved treasure!



Elsy, from the collection of Karen Golden

Not much, if anything, is known about some talented dollmakers from the past. The dolls remain, but most of the dollmakers' stories are lost to time, with no one to fill in the blanks. She hopes that people in the future will know about her as a dollmaker. I think that is guaranteed. Articles will be written about Kathy and her Babes from the Woods. Perhaps, a book, in the future? In any case, Kathy's dolls will tell her story, now and in the years to come.



Afternoon chat

I refer the reader to the following articles:

Doll News, Summer 2011, "Adventures of a Doll" by Susan Dossetter

Antique Doll Collector, December 2010, "Babes from the Woods" by Lynn Murray

A special thanks to Kathy for the photographs from the Babes from the Woods archives, and to her clients for sharing their photographs. Kathy can be reached on Facebook for all doll-related inquiries, and through her website, babesfromthewoods.com, or via email at babesfromthewoods@gmail.com.

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