

Carousing with Fairies



Imaginary friends grow into a fantasy career for Stephanie Blythe.

By Sharon Verbeten

As a child growing up in rural Maryland in the 1950s, Stephanie Blythe would venture into the woods, entertaining herself with her imaginary friends.

"Fairies were always a part of my life," says Blythe, 62. "I would while away the hours making tea sets from acorns."

Blythe, who now lives in Northern California, has been fortunate enough to turn that imaginary world of her childhood into a career—one that has spanned more than 30 years.

The award-winning artist has drawn on those early experiences to create one-of-a-kind porcelain dolls, including playful babes in the woods (lounging on beds of lichen), tiny half-pint fairies, exotic underwater beings and magnificent mermaids.

Dreams from Fairyland

Even though Blythe knew she would make art her career in some manner, "I think it was all very serendipitous," she says of her entrée into doll making.

Blythe studied textile design at the Philadelphia College of Art and has

Mother Nature is made of porcelain and features antique textiles, Austrian crystals and natural materials, including acorns and lichen. Created in 2009, the figure stands 3½ inches tall. Photo by Stephanie Blythe



always had an interest in collecting antique textiles. On her website, she comments, "Inspiration comes from many places...an antique appliqué, the colors or image in an old children's book illustration, the expression on a face."

"Fantasy, especially fairies, have always characterized my work as an artist," notes Blythe, who began making dolls in 1977 and soon teamed up with artist Susan Snodgrass. "When we started, there were no books on making dolls," Blythe recalls.

"What was there was pretty rudimentary. Susan and I started with dollhouse dolls that we found in a local shop.

"At the time, we were in the miniature world; we hadn't crossed over into the doll world. People who bought [our] dolls at the time wanted dolls for their dollhouses," she says of the 6-inch creations.

The duo used porcelain parts made by Sylvia Mobley, an artist who later taught Blythe the traditional porcelain process.

By the 1980s, however, "Our business got so successful that Sylvia didn't want to produce that much porcelain," Blythe shares. "She couldn't keep up with demand, so she taught me."



This 2009 creation is 8-inch *Underwater Nursery*, made of porcelain, antique textiles, pearls, seashells and sea urchins. The 2-inch mini merbabies in shells feature hand-dyed antique embroidery tails. Photo by Hap Sakwa



The porcelain *Sewing Box Fairy* from 2009 features antique textiles and buttons, a sterling crown, handmade roses and cicada wings. Photo by Stephanie Blythe

A Cottage Industry Grows

Learning to make dolls has been an evolutionary process for Blythe, but by the 1980s, she had spawned a small cottage industry—with 80 shops and galleries selling her dolls. "In the '80s and '90s, dolls and crafts were very popular," she says. "I could virtually sell anything I made."

Until a few years ago, Blythe sculpted her dolls of pre-made doll-maker's flesh-colored porcelain. "I now like to use white porcelain and use washes of flesh-colored china paint to create more depth in the paintings," she reveals.

"Through the sculpting, I feel like my work is an evolution," Blythe says. "I never really draw and sketch and say, 'This is what I'm going to do.' It has its own flow. It takes on its life as I'm doing it."

"Although I make molds for my work, I individually sculpt each clay piece after it is removed from the

mold," she continues. "In this way, I can give each its unique character, and the movement and expression of the figure is not limited by the restrictions of any mold making."

Achieving just the right visage and emotion in her dolls is paramount to Blythe, who adds, "I definitely have to have some connection with it. I think when I start painting the faces, they become alive to me. I work hard to get the porcelain to create the connection... whether it's a fairy fast asleep in a teacup...I want to convey some kind of connection to the viewer through it."

Whether it is the delicate lace of a fairy's wing or the shirring of a mermaid's gown, Blythe pays particular attention to the detailing on her dolls. Each costume emerges—often intuitively—from a variety of textures and patterns of decorative elements she has collected. That includes everything from acorns and lichen found on her walks to



Looking for Time measures 11 inches by 14 inches by 9½ inches. The 2004 creation is made of porcelain, an antique clock case, antique and new silks, antique trims, paper, antique miniature time pieces, brass clock hands and opals. Photo by Dean Walters



Blue Fairy, from 2005, is an 8-inch porcelain figure featuring hand-dyed antique textiles and Swarovski crystals. Photo by Jerry Anthony



Edith, a 10½-inch figure created in 2002, is porcelain with a wired cloth body and features antique textiles. Photo by Stephanie Blythe



From 1991, 10-inch *Flower* is porcelain with silk flower petals. Photo by Stephanie Blythe



Created in 2009, 3½-inch *Dragonfly* is made of porcelain, antique textiles, including antique black lace with a dragonfly motif, and Austrian crystals and beads. The figure also features an apatite crystal pendant and silver filigree wings. Photo by Stephanie Blythe

Mad About Madi

The world of *Madi the Magical Fairy* is indeed ethereal—but it is one that welcomes children warmly. Award-winning doll artists Stephanie Blythe and Linda Mason have teamed up to create the line and market it through their company, Itty Bitty Toy Co. Drawing inspiration from their grandchildren and childhood memories, the duo hoped to create low-priced, high-quality play dolls for children.



Sneakboo, Madi's companion, in a dragon costume

Blythe and Mason designed the prototypes in porcelain, then in wax, and had the dolls produced in China. Five 12-inch vinyl dolls (with huggable bodies) kick off the line: *Madi as Sky*, *Madi as Ocean*, *Madi as Forest*, *Madi as Garden* and *Sneakboo* in his bee costume.

"We've done okay with them," Blythe shares, "but it's a tough market right now." She says that even though the dolls were safety tested, some consumers still have concerns about buying toys made overseas.

The dolls retail for \$50 each; the costumes are \$25 each. For more information on the line, visit maddoll.com.



Madi as Sky

velvet, crystals, lace, metallic thread and miniature seashells.

"Although my work is small in scale, I enjoy including intricate detail so that living with my work is contemplative and a constant discovery," she says.

"My goal is to create a beautiful work of art that will inspire an awakening of dreams, memories, stories, longings through the tactile, the sensual, the unexpected and the surprising."

A Changing Market

While Blythe's devotion to detail hasn't changed in her decades of doll making, she realizes the industry and audience have different expectations. "Our culture of the doll has changed a lot over the years," she admits. "I still consider myself pretty successful, but I'm constantly reinventing myself."

In addition to her regular gallery of offerings, Blythe designs play dolls with artist Linda Mason (see sidebar) and creates souvenir pieces for doll conventions, such as the United Federation of Doll Clubs' annual convention.

"The money is not coming from the same direction anymore," she says, adding that while she has felt the crunch

of the current recession, "I feel very fortunate [to keep busy] in this economy."

She also remains a bit distressed about the perception of those who work in porcelain. "It's disconcerting that all these people that work in polymer [clay] badmouth porcelain," she says. "I'd like to have them walk in my shoes. There's an art to it, and every step of the way, there are things that could go wrong. I just really like the endurance of porcelain. One hundred years from now, my porcelain is going to be around."

Blythe relishes that now, in her 60s, she can still foster creativity with her dolls, and she has no plans to retire. "I'm the kind of person who has to be busy," she says. "I'm always doing something."

And that's good news for both Blythe and her collectors. "I know my work makes people happy and brings them joy," she shares. "Even if somebody doesn't buy something... just watching the expressions on people's faces. It is fulfilling to see people be amazed." →

For more on Stephanie Blythe's work, visit stephanieblythe.com.