

Porcelain and papier maché
make a winning combination

Marlaine's Menagerie

cover story



Many of Marlaine Verhelst's dolls have an animal companion. In *Tired of White Horses*, the figure sits atop a papier maché leaping steed.

You may not have heard of Margriet Heymans, but if you are an art doll enthusiast, you are likely familiar with one of her students – porcelain sculptor Marlaine Verhelst.

One of Verhelst's teachers at De Koninklijke Academie voor Kunst en Vormgeving in 's-Hertogenbosch (an academy of art and design in The Netherlands) was Margriet – a writer and illustrator of children's books who made dolls for her children to play with.

"She used to bring these dolls with her to the academy for the students to make watercolor paintings after them," says Verhelst. "Though she was not a professional doll maker and her dolls not meant to be art dolls, I was very impressed by the naïve and strong characters of the dolls."

It was these dolls that were in Verhelst's mind when she started making her own dolls in 1976. They are still her source of inspiration for keeping it simple.

"Don't add too many details and don't use too many ideas in one piece," she says.

Another motto Verhelst creates by is "Don't stick to conventions. If a blue horse suits a doll better, make a blue horse. Dare to be unique."

The results are three-dimensional illustrations of imaginary stories. Never one to use existing fairy tales or characters for her pieces, Verhelst believes it is not creative to copy an idea someone else came up with.

Her first dolls were made in air-drying stoneclay, but she switched to hand sculpting porcelain after a couple of years. She says porcelain is more professional and longer lasting, and she likes the surface better.

Sculpting porcelain is a difficult technique, though. A few years ago, Verhelst released a

compact disc detailing her technique. (Her eldest son Polle handled the design and layout of the CD. Polle works as a Web designer and created his mother's Web site.)

At a certain point in her work, animals became an integral part of the stories told by Verhelst's dolls. The first animals were huge. They had great effect but were impractical to ship or to travel with. So she began making smaller animals using the same technique.

A nice example is her warrior on a toy horse. When Verhelst finished the piece and had to come up with a name, she thought, "What on earth could one fight on a toy horse?" She decided on *Fighting the Clouds* because

there seemed to be nothing else to fight. However, the expression on the doll's face doesn't show frustration with his lot in life; he looks happy and optimistic. The piece was bought by a person in a wheel chair, and Verhelst wrote her a postcard saying, "I hope he will fight all your clouds for you."

The title of *How to Handle a Turtle* is a little joke. Just before making the turtle, Verhelst finished a doll situated inside the mouth of a crocodile, pushing himself out. That piece was called *How to Handle a Crocodile*.

Riding a Pig

The turtle piece is based on the idea of holding a carrot in front of a donkey to persuade it to move. Verhelst thought a carrot wouldn't work for a turtle, and it took some time to find something else to put on the fishing rod that could make a turtle move faster. But the figure on top looks like he isn't interested in going anywhere anyway.

Though Verhelst lives in The Netherlands, she often travels to the United States for exhibitions and teaching. Together with Dutch doll artist Ankie Daanen she teaches the five-day workshop "Meet the Dutch Touch" in the United States twice a year.

Verhelst joined the National Institute of American Doll Artists as an artist member in 1999. "A wonderful organization with doll artists from all over the world promoting dolls as art," she says about the group.

For more information about the artist, her classes and her dolls, e-mail marlaine@home.nl or visit www.marlaineverhelst.com. Visit <http://www.polle.net/marlaine/cdrom.htm> to purchase Verhelst's instructional CD about hand sculpting porcelain.



How to Handle a Turtle



Fighting the Clouds



Begin by drawing a rough outline of the horse on a base material.



Armatures for legs, ears and other appendages can be inserted into the base after the first coat of papier maché is applied.



When the legs are complete, the joint between the base and armature has disappeared.

Creating animal companions

Verhelst uses commercially produced papier maché for her animals. The brand she prefers (Omyacolor) is not available in the United States. A good alternative is Celluclay. These products are sold as a dry powder that is mixed with water until it feels like pizza dough. Celluclay should be kept in the refrigerator after mixing.

Papier maché isn't clay and cannot be sculpted as you would sculpt clay. However, when sculpting is required, use traditional sculpting tools.

The first step is to create a base form in the animal's shape. This will be covered with papier maché. Verhelst usually cuts her base from a block of polystyrene foam such as Styrofoam. Styrofoam is used for insulating buildings and can be purchased at most hardware stores.

For cutting and shaping the foam, Verhelst uses electric cutters available at many craft stores. These cutters melt through the foam with a wire heated by an electrical current running through it. If you are simply experimenting with this technique, you can cut and shape the foam with a fine serrated knife. The disadvantage of working with a knife is that it makes a mass of static-filled white crumbs. So keep the vacuum cleaner standing by!

As an example of her papier maché technique, Verhelst offers this look at constructing a horse.

First cut out the basic shape; it is best to start with a side view. Drawing marker lines on the foam will guide you and help you to work symmetrically.

After cutting the basic shape, Verhelst covers the foam with one layer of papier maché. After the layer dries, you can easily stick through it to attach ears, legs or any other appendages. Additional layers of papier maché will cover the joints where the appendages are inserted into the body.

The appendages require a base for building up the papier maché. For the horse armatures, Verhelst used galvanized iron wire for the ears and electrical wire, the kind with the copper core and plastic around it, for the legs. She also uses a lot of masking tape. Papier maché sticks well to masking tape.

Glass marbles serve for the eyes of many animals. For smaller animals, glass teddy bear eyes, natural stone or glass beads work very well.

Put the eyes in place when the first layer of papier maché is dry by cutting holes to fit the marbles in. Hold them in place with some papier maché.

Eye lids and other fine details can be added using paperclay.

The total piece needs several layers of papier maché. Each new layer makes the piece stronger and smoother as well as more defined.

For the tail and mane, Verhelst used old-fashioned decorative fringe that was stiffened and held in place with tacky glue.

Verhelst does not sand her animals before painting them because she likes the natural surface of the papier maché. Before painting, the animal has to be completely dry. To speed up the drying process, pieces can be put outside in the sun and the wind, under a hair dryer or (in winter) on a high spot in a heated room.

Before painting the animal with acrylics, apply a coat of inexpensive white latex paint as a primer. That is followed by two layers of acrylic paint in the base color of the animal.



Here the horse is approximately half-way through the creation process.



A base color is applied to the figure and details are added on top.



Antiquing medium is applied to the entire horse, then rubbed off.



The completed horse has marble eyes and a mane and tail made of stiffened decorative trim.

Verhelst often has the fabric for the doll's clothes lying to the side to ensure a match. Accents and details are painted in other colors over the base color. These accents may be opaque or translucent.

Acrylics are easy to work with and available in many different colors including metallics – which are ideal for fish, according to Verhelst. Brushes can be cleaned with water.

After finishing the painting, Verhelst applies an oil-based antiquing medium to the piece for an overall patina. With a lint-free cotton rag, the surplus patina can be wiped off. The patina remaining in the deeper parts will give the animal an antique look.

The piece is finished with a varnish designed for acrylics. Verhelst especially likes Winsor and Newton water-based varnishes. For the horse she mixed matte and glossy for a satin finish.

Verhelst hopes this article will inspire doll makers to have some fun making their own animals. Because of the drying times involved with these pieces, on-site classes don't work well for the subject, but Verhelst teaches online animal-making classes that do not have the time constraints that a workshop would have.

An online animal-making class by Verhelst will be available Feb. 8 at www.dollmaking.org/classroom/moodle. Also available on an ongoing basis over the Web is a course in making this horse and Verhelst's "Fish on Wheels" class. E-mail her at marlaine@home.nl for more information.