

AD

Each Doll Should be an Adventure: CONVEYING EMOTION MARLAINE VERHELST

by Ricë Freeman-Zachery

It's the faces that capture you. Oh, the costumes are marvelous, and the companion animals are beyond beguiling, but it's Marlaime Verhelst's amazingly expressive faces that draw you in. The wry grin, the barely-contained chuckle, the knowing smile — looking at these faces, you're absolutely certain these dolls know far more than they're telling, and you want to know what they know.

"My dolls should be intelligent, a bit introverted, but happy with themselves — without being arrogant — with a sense of humor. I don't want to make an anatomically correct face, but I do want a human expression. I don't want a sweet dolly face that is just pretty, but I also don't want an angry or sad face," explains Marlaime. It's a tall order, especially when the materials going into the order are as demanding as porcelain and watercolor, but Marlaime uses the media to perfection in creating her 3-D illustrations. ➔





“My art school education was illustration,” Marlaine says of her degree from the Art Academy in ‘s-Hertogenbosch, the Netherlands. Her native language is Dutch; she is fluent in German and English and also speaks “a bit of” French. “At Art Academy, one of my teachers — a writer and illustrator of children’s books — made dolls for fun, for her children to play with. I will never forget the day she showed us those dolls. I was fascinated. Though I never saw those dolls again, they are always in my mind when making my own dolls.” She explains that they inspire her to keep her work simple, conveying emotion through an upturned corner of the mouth or half-closed eyelids.

At the time Marlaine saw these dolls, there was no vibrant art doll community in the Netherlands. Marlaine was one of the first to really begin to explore the form, and she feels this was a stroke of luck because there was no one exhibiting figures like those she wanted to create. Marlaine had to learn everything herself, resulting in a distinctive style that’s immediately recognizable to students and collectors the world over. Today she teaches and exhibits her work internationally, has written books and magazine articles on doll-making, and is on the boards of both NIADA (niada.org) and DABIDA (dabida.eu), all this in addition to designing textile prints, working at the National Museum of Textiles in her hometown of Tilburg, and



teaching design at a local fashion school. She teaches a week-long workshop every year in Paris, and twice a year she and her Dutch colleague Ankie Daanen travel to the United States to teach “The Dutch Touch,” five-day master classes, the next of which will be held in Houston in May.

In going through her attic recently, Marlaine found an old cigar box filled with brightly-colored sculpted figures she created when she was 10. A serious interest in sculpting didn’t manifest itself until years later; however, even then it was a painstaking process of experimentation.

“My first dolls were trials in different styles and very ugly when I see them now. But I remember how exciting it felt to make those first dolls, to be able to create something like that. My very first doll was sculpted in gray DAS clay,” she remembers. “After art school, I met a friend who showed me white air-dry Darwi clay and showed me how to sculpt a breastplate and to connect sculpted hands and feet to a fabric body. That helped a lot technically.” Given her expertise in textiles, you might expect Marlaine to needle-stitch her faces, but her interest from the very first has always been in capturing simple, subtle detail. She explains that, in addition to being able to capture that in porcelain and watercolor, she just really enjoys the process of working with those materials. As her technical



skills progressed, she realized the possibilities of the medium and embraced it wholeheartedly. While she loves working with fabric to create wonderful costumes, it’s the sculpting she loves.

“The textiles that I see in my work are different from the textiles I can use for a doll. After all, I work in a fashion school. But sometimes I can get inspired by a color combination, a shape, or a texture I saw in a work-related situation. And my love for textiles means that I always will dress my dolls and not want to move to just sculpting.”

When Marlaine begins a new piece, she first gathers everything she thinks she wants to use — a pile of fabrics, a found object she wants to use as a prop, and maybe an animal figure she’s already created.

“Sometimes materials inspire me, like my pieces decorated with the chess pieces from my father. Sometimes I have a story or an image in my head. This part takes already a long time because I usually change my pile constantly.” Then she creates the heads, hands, and feet, taking a week to sculpt multiple sets so her kiln is full for each firing. She picks one set to work with and carefully packs the rest away for later figures. Because she has a day job — or, rather, several day jobs — finding a stretch of uninterrupted time means taking full advantage of weekends and breaks in her teaching schedule. She also makes good use of the time away from her work to let inspiration percolate, explaining, “Most good and creative ideas I get while riding on my bike or in my car or just before I fall asleep. Mostly it works good for me to go away from my art for a while. But if the gaps between working on a piece get too big, I sometimes forget what I was up to. So I make sketches or notes with rough ideas and details.” If she has to take a break of several days in the middle of working on a piece, she puts these notes, along with the sculpted parts and the fabric and props, all together in a box. When she comes back to it, everything is there waiting, reminding her of where she was going. Or, rather, where she first thought she might be going, because there are always surprises.

“The dolls never look exactly as planned because I usually change my mind several times: it is a creative process. I want to surprise myself. Each doll should be an adventure.” If she can see the doll ahead of time, clearly envisioning the details and what the finished piece will look like, there’s really no point in making it because it already exists. “Making the piece would just be craft,” she explains. ➔



Marlaine credits endless hours of life drawing classes for her ability to create realistic human figures but admits that she will sometimes re-make an entire piece because the proportions don't feel quite right. Throughout the process, she sticks to her motto: Keep it simple.

"Adding too much embellishment takes away the real soul of the doll," she says. "Replacing one bead by another, or adding another row of beads, will not really help if the doll is not good, and if the doll is good, it will not really make a difference. I doubt a lot before I add something, but after deciding I mostly leave it like it is."

While many artists struggle for years to find their unique style, Marlaine was fortunate to discover hers early on, when her first dolls, displayed in local galleries and shop windows, sold immediately and she began to get commissions.

"One of my first customers asked me to make a doll in the style of Arthur Rackham's paintings," she says. "That put me on the right track into the direction of fantasy dolls." Finding a style that felt right and that provides continuous inspiration was a huge step, and fantasy has been that for her. The key for Marlaine, though, is that the figures she creates illustrate her own stories, not those imagined by someone else.

"If I make a bird with a doll on top, I don't want to make Niels Holgerson because that story exists already. I prefer stories

that don't exist yet. I am also not interested in making *Alice in Wonderland* or *Little Red Riding Hood* for the same reason."

The world where these fantasies come to life is a 4 x 4 meter studio in the house she shares with her husband, Ton. When they bought the house 28 years ago, Marlaine took one look at the room and said, "I want this room as my studio!" With a sink and windows to the south and east, it's perfect for the marathon days of work. When she has time to be in the studio, she's often there from 7 a.m. until almost midnight.

"It is great to be able to create. It enriches my life — in fact, all the things that come with making my dolls do: I travel a lot for exhibitions and teaching, I am a board member of NIADA and DABIDA, and I get to meet so many wonderful people from all over the world. I am a happy person. I hope to bring people a smile with my work and to inspire them." ❖

You can reach Marlaine by email at marlaine@home.nl and visit her website at marlaineverhelst.com. You can also find her on Facebook.

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