

# Merry Old Souls

by Lillian Alberti

*H*urrying along 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue in New York City that fateful day, I didn't realize that what I was about to see in Tiffany's storefront windows would have such an impact on my life! I was a young fashion student at Parsons School of Design at the time, and I had happened upon the amazing artistry of Van Craig. I had never seen anything like his dolls before and was completely awed by his over-the-top creations. I wondered if I myself could do the same. On my way home, I stopped at an art supply store, purchased a few tools, including something called Celluclay, and started working. I was very pleased with my first attempt (which, by the way, I still have) and was immediately smitten with the art of doll making. Well, that was nearly 20 years ago, and I have been creating dolls ever since!

Over the years, I have honed my skills and developed a personal style, and while Van Craig's work served as an inspiration, my own work, happily, is more whimsical than over-the-top! It also seems that, over the years, I have developed a fascination for jesters and children's storybook characters. I find myself coming back to these beloved, whimsical themes time and again. Revisiting Mother Goose nursery rhymes, Alice in Wonderland and the like does so much to feed my imagination. I always find these old favorites inspiring and tend to find something new in them each time.

Once the inspiration has struck, I'm ready to sit down to begin constructing my project. My construction technique is quite simple: cotton muslin stuffed with polyester batting over a wire armature for the body, arms, and legs. I've been using this method since day one and it's always worked well for me. Starting with a Styrofoam egg for the head, I notch out the eye sockets and mouth opening, then add layers of Celluclay papier mâché to sculpt the facial features. I sculpt the eyes, hands, and feet separately. After a drying period, followed

by some light sanding, I paint the faces before putting the doll pieces together. This usually gives me a sense of "who" the doll will be. When the face is finished, I attach all the parts and begin to paint them. My goal is to give each of my dolls a unique expressive quality. I suppose that's why I love painting the eyes most of all. So much is expressed through the eyes! I still work with and enjoy using Celluclay papier mâché; it's pliable and easy to shape. It's a thrill knowing that I can shape this mushy lump into whatever I choose it to be. By the time all the pieces come together, the doll has a name, a unique personal history, and is now ready to dress.

As a student at Parsons, I received extensive training in fabric draping, pattern making, and garment construction. I was even taught how to bead a garment and how to make handmade buttonholes! I draw on this training and the experience I gained in my years in the fashion industry as I design and hand-sew all my doll's clothing and many of their accessories, including hats, coats, handbags, etc. I even knit sweaters and sculpt shoes with real laces or buttons if necessary. I often shop thrift stores for worn fabrics, old buttons, or "antique" jewelry to accessorize my dolls. When completed, each doll is mounted on a permanent wood base ([www.nicolecrafts.com](http://www.nicolecrafts.com)), and receives my decorative "signature" tag (decorative paper by The Paper Company) that tells its own story. The tag is affixed with a sweet polka dot ribbon (Michael's "dashes, dots & checks").

For the "Jester, Seated" piece, I had envisioned a weary little man who wonders whether his performance could compete with the fiddlers in old King Cole's court? His "story tag" reveals just that. I made him using my basic construction technique and costumed him using layers of luxurious fabrics and findings including: iridescent rayon, velvet, lace, metal buttons, silk, →





*Jester, standing  
21" tall*



vintage metal chains, vintage metal tassels, metal "jingle" bells, a mohair wig, and rayon ribbon. He holds in his hand a "gilded" wooden scepter ([www.nicolecrafts.com](http://www.nicolecrafts.com)) swirled with a golden organza ribbon ("best values" Jo-Ann stores) and sits on a "gilded" stool attached to a permanent wood base ([www.nicolecrafts.com](http://www.nicolecrafts.com)). He is 18½ inches.

The "Jester, Standing," on the other hand, seems to be the complete antithesis of his seated colleague! This sneaky little fellow is up to something, as his "story tag" reveals. Again, using my basic construction method, I dressed him using opulent fabrics including iridescent rayon, silk, satin, rayon ribbon, velvet and lace. He is outfitted with metal buttons, vintage metal chains, metal "jingle" bells, imitation "hair," and glass beads for buttons. He also holds a "gilded" scepter swirled with the same organza ribbon, and swings from a "gilded" wooden pole which is permanently attached to its wood base. From base to tip he measures 21 inches.

Although most of my doll ideas come purely from my imagination, my favorite piece, the "Church Ladies," was inspired by a well-loved family friend. Esther, always full of zest and joy, would often stop by for a visit on her way home from church each week. This my largest piece yet (a record 30 inches!!) and although I enjoyed working on it, I now prefer to work on smaller, more manageable pieces. The construction, as always, remains



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the same. The taller figure, whom I sculpted first, seemed to grow even as I worked on her! The shorter lady needed quite a bit of extra padding to create her full-figured look. Creating her was definitely the most fun I've had working on a doll. I think I captured a lot of personality in her, and, to me, she comes across as the more dominant of the two figures. I chose fabrics with lots of textures and rich colors in order to reflect the ladies' personalities. They are outfitted in chenille, satin, velvet, faux fur, costume jewelry, and exotic feathers and are now off to church, as their "story tag" suggests. They are permanently attached to a wooden base I painted with a faux marble finish.

For me, the creative process never slows down. I always seem to have a project in the works and am currently working on two dolls at the moment. My body of works is forever increasing, and, as a result, I have recently launched a new website ([www.a-lil-whimsy.com](http://www.a-lil-whimsy.com)) in order to sell my creations online. I have immensely enjoyed creating art dolls all these years. From the moment of inspiration to construction of the final product, this process is a joy that I hope will continue always! ❖

*Lillian Alberti is a muralist and art doll artist who lives and works in New York's Hudson Valley area. Lillian, who is a member of the Warwick Valley Art League and the Central New York Doll & Art Guild, has recently launched a new Web site. You can see more of her work at [www.a-lil-whimsy.com](http://www.a-lil-whimsy.com).*



*Jester, seated  
20" tall*