

Creative Living

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Toy business isn't just child's play

By Susan McCoy
special writer

WENDY BLAU'S IDEA for a direct mail toy catalog came to bloom in June of 1988. Less than two years later, Blau, owner/president of the Southfield-based Ethan's Wooden Toy & Doll Company, completed her first mailing in September.

"I mailed 30,000 catalogs around the country. I'm just getting to the point where I'm excited. I get several calls a day. *Things are really starting to pick up.*"

The cover of Ethan's catalog, a full-color picture of two small children engaged in play, and the inside pages, give the impression that this is an old established company. It has an unhurried look, a single page shows two or three handcrafted toys and includes some history of toys or a poem.

Blau said, "I like to do things first class . . . most catalogs cram as many items on one page as they possibly can . . . but that's not my style, my style is different, and I'm willing to pay extra to express it."

Blau had an idea for a catalog because she was dissatisfied with her work in sales promotion for a local firm where she had been for 18 years. Instead of quitting her job, she worked out a deal with her employer so she could work out of her home. This gave her more time with her son, Ethan, and as a single parent, this was important to her.

SHES WAS INTRODUCED to a wooden toyemaker quite by accident and something clicked. She was impulsive and she looked at each other and said "do you want to get more involved in this?" — the timing was right for both of us.

"I have a high regard for homemade toys. I'm old enough, I've had my 40th birthday, to have had a childhood that was dependent on entertainment. We relied on street games. We were the toy. I didn't have a television in my bedroom, computers, video games, and all that electronic stuff."

Because of this she believes that a toy should stimulate creative, imaginative thought, and that motivates her to develop her own toy company. "The toys that allow children to think, and I don't mean in an academic way because I'm not into early learning, but to think in a human way, are the most valuable," she said.

She said that because of this philosophy, "Everything that I carry will be handcrafted and made mostly from wood and cloth. I don't care blanche dismiss all plastic toys, but I believe that what's out there is garbage. Many of them don't teach children to be imaginative or creative in their play. If a toy doesn't involve a child, then I won't choose it for my catalog."

She said that after she found her supplier of wooden toys, she felt that wooden toys wouldn't be enough so she added stick puppets and then a line of dolls. She buys from her suppliers' price list and then calculates a selling price for her catalog. The entire process of organizing the company took more than a year.

UNLIKE MANY COMPANIES which go from retail sales to catalog sales, she never wanted to work directly with the public. "I like the nitty-gritty work behind a business and forming a catalog business allows me to do that."

While she said it is very expensive to put a catalog together, she used her skills to save money, to give off cheap local business people in this business hire an ad agency, copywriter and such, but all these things that I did myself would have cost me additional thousands of dollars. I had the tools to get to do what I wanted because of my sales promotion experience."

She said it was a process filled with decisions — what kind, what size, what clothing should the dolls wear and what new items she still needed.

The toddler bike is an example of a new item. "This wasn't one of the wooden toy line, but I wanted it. So together the toymaker and I designed it and he made one for a prototype. The one in the catalog is the first prototype. I'm glad I added it because it looks like it is going to be a popular item."

Then there were last minute decisions that created extra work — like finding the sock monkey. "The catalog was all set, then my son, Ethan, at a senior citizen craft store. I walked in and there I saw a sock monkey. Well, I got goose bumps. I guess it was a nostalgic toy for me. Somewhere in my childhood there must have been a sock monkey because I said to



JERRY ZOLYNSKY/staff photographer

Wendy Blau and her 4-year-old son, Ethan, play with the sock monkey that she just happened to find and fall in love with.



'I have a high regard for homemade toys. I'm old enough, I've had my 40th birthday, to have had a childhood that was dependent on your mind for entertainment. We were the toy.'

— Wendy Blau

myself, wow, I've got to buy this.' She tore her layout apart, found a photographer and later a supplier and the popular toy moved into the action.

SHE DISTRIBUTED her cata-

logs by using broker lists and discovered in the process which ones are most profitable for her business.

"It's my goal," she said, "to have and to create a catalog for the 1990 Christmas season. I won't keep doing a catalog every year. If the catalog gets to the point where I'm really happy with it, then I'll let it go for a couple of years."

Besides the history and poems, there is another message she wants included in her catalog. "There was never a doubt in my mind that I was going to have black children represented in my catalog . . . I chose Southfield to live in because it is one of the only truly integrated suburbs in the tri-state area. I'm not going to change the world. I'm not a marcher and I don't protest on the protest lines. It is just my way of living up to what I believe," she said.

Icons convey Byzantine religious spirit

"Holy Image, Holy Space: Icons and Frescoes from Greece" is the most important collection of its kind ever shown in North America. More than 60 examples are at the Detroit Institute of Arts through Sunday, Jan. 28.

The icons date from the 10th-17th century and the exhibition introduces these paintings as a uniquely Byzantine achievement born of equal measures of creativity and spirituality.

"Short of an extensive tour of Greece, 'Holy Image, Holy Space' offers museum visitors a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to survey this unfamiliar category of painting," said Iva Listkywycz, DIA associate curator, European painting, who is in charge of the Detroit exhibition. "Only by personally confronting the images can the viewer fully appreciate their power."

At its height, the Byzantine Empire included most of the Mediterranean world and controlled territory from Spain to Persia. It endured for more than a thousand years. By the end of the fourth century, Christianity had become the official religion of the empire and Byzantium lavished its most sumptuous art on the church and especially on the state.

In Greek, the word icon (elikon) means simply "image," but Eastern Christianity venerates the saints and Biblical scenes as embodying their subjects' personalities and spiritual force. The worshiper offers reverence and devotion to the visible image and to the holiness that resides in it.

THE ICON is a portrait or scene painted in tempera on a gold-covered rectangular wooden

panel; some icons are presented as two and three-panel hinged paintings, while frescoes, such as those filling the domes of Byzantium's finest churches, are "mural icons."

During their apprenticeship, artists learned to follow traditional images and written descriptions in colors, expressions and poses of their subjects. Emotional intensity is a hallmark of all painted icons. Essential features include direct eye contact between the image and the worshiper; gestures of blessing that engage and envelop the viewer; elongated figures drawn with strong outlines, probably inspired by mosaics; and luminous gold backgrounds — reminding the worshiper that the image is eternal, unconfined by time or place. Gold, deep blues, reds, and emerald and sapphire greens reinforce the intensity of the icon's gaze and presence and power.

Highlights are:

- One of the finest examples of Christian medieval painting — a 12th century bilateral icon from Kastoria, northern Greece. On one side is a Virgin and Child, and after the Hodegetria of Constantinople (a portrait of the Virgin believed to have been painted by Saint Luke).

On the other side is a portrait of the dead Jesus. The emotional intensity of this, the oldest Akra Tenepleios (Man of Sorrows) painting known to exist, anticipated the powerful crucifixion scenes by the 13th century Italian master Cimabue.

- One of the few surviving icons of Domenikos Theotokopoulos (1541-1614), painted on his native island of Crete before he departed for Italy and Spain where he became famous as El Greco. From the Benaki Museum in Athens, the icon is a pane depicting Saint Luke painting the Hodegetria.



"The Raising of Lazarus," from the first half of the 12th century, is on loan from a private collection in Athens, Greece.

- Examples of chapel frescoes, whose holy images created the "holy space," or setting for the liturgy. One is an entire frescoed sanctuary from the Church of Saint Nicholas at Veria in the Peloponnesus. This 16th century ensemble includes the iconostasis (the icon screen that separates the altar and clergy from the lay congregation).

- Among several pairs of sanctuaries in the exhibition, the largest (5½ feet) and finest are from the Monastery of St. John the Theologian on the island of Patmos. Painted during the second half of the 15th century, the upper register features

an Annunciation scene against a dream-like backdrop of classical rooftops; St. Peter and St. John the Theologian face one another in the lower.

THE SUBJECTS AND FORMS OF icons have remained unchanged for centuries. The images in this exhibition are both religious and aesthetic achievements of high order — compelling works no matter what religious or artistic perspective the viewer brings to them.

The exhibition was organized by the Greek Ministry of Culture, the Byzantine Museum of Athens, The



St. John the Baptist, 16th century icon, was loaned by the Greek Ministry of Culture and the Church of St. Mathaios Sinalton.

Trust for Museum Exhibitions, Washington, D.C., and the Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore. Partial support was provided by the National Endowment for the Humanities.

A free 17-minute video on icons will be shown continuously in the Prentis Court screening room. The exhibition was organized by the Greek Ministry of Culture, the Byzantine Museum of Athens, The

exhibition is open to the public from 9:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Tuesday-Sunday.

Tickets for this exhibition are \$3 for adults, \$1 for students and seniors. Children under 12 and Founders members are admitted free. Tickets may be purchased on a walk-in basis on the day of the visit.

For information and group appointments, call 833-7900.