

She's busy re-forming a tradition

By Linda Lee Sparkman
special writer

If WE could go back in time, to say, 1885, and look into a home, we might see someone painting the finishing touches on a decorative figure they made earlier by pouring wall plaster into a tin chocolate mold, or a pewter ice cream mold from their kitchen.

Today, we might see the same thing in Kathi Bejma's Canton home. But in this case the pieces would probably end up in one of over 500 museums and specialty shops across the United States that carry the reproduction chalkware manufactured by her company, Walnut Ridge Primitives.

Bejma (pronounced Bay-ma) made her first chalkware reproduction about five years ago, combining her appreciation of history, artistic ability, and interest in antiques. "I'd seen a lot of chalkware I really liked while I was out antiquing (shopping for antiques), Bejma said. "But they were so totally unaffordable, that it just wasn't feasible to buy one."

Prices on authentic antique chalkware range from \$700 to nearly \$10,000 according to Bejma. Another drawback for the collector was that authentic pieces are often cracked or chipped because they are made of simple wall plaster.

IT'S HERE THAT opportunity knocked, although Bejma didn't see that at first.

She wanted a piece of chalkware, but couldn't justify spending that much money. So she decided to try to make a piece for herself. Her vision was to craft a chalkware piece as close to an authentic piece as possible, only a little more durable.

After consulting a number of reference books, locating a mold, painting over a sample, Bejma began to work. It wasn't easy, and it didn't happen on the first or second try,

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— Kathi Bejma

but, "I was bound and determined," said Bejma. "I was going to do it." The piece took about 20 different tries. "I worked a very old, dull looking finish, so I just kept trying until I came up with something I liked," she said.

WHEN THE PIECE was finally finished, friends began admiring it and requesting copies for their own collections, and Bejma obliged.

Next Bejma included a few reproduction chalkware pieces on her display table at folk-art shows, where she had been selling wood reproductions for the last few years. When those first chalkware pieces sold, Bejma made a few more. When the second group sold, she made more.

This continued until the fall of 1987, when one day at a folk-art show at Meadowbrook in Rochester, Barbara Pitt, owner of Country Heritage Wholesale Markets saw Bejma's display.

Pitt recognized the marketability of Bejma's chalkware pieces and encouraged her to make them available to the wholesale market. "I knew to do that, I was going to have to be able to produce more than I was doing at that time," Bejma said. "I knew I wanted to have to find someone to help me."

After six months of searching, Bejma found someone to pour the chalkware, a precise and time-consuming function.

Bejma took on the wholesale market in Valley Forge, Pa. in June of 1988.

"I really didn't anticipate the responses we got," said Bejma. "I just thought, well if we take a few orders, that'll be great. I still had all

to duplicate the antique chalkware herself, and again when she decided to attend her first wholesale market.

ANOTHER JUMP WAS when she hired more people and began accepting orders to fill anticipated orders for this year's Christmas rush. Thinking back to last year's frantic situation, Bejma says she told herself, "I will do whatever I have to do, but I'm not getting into that predicament again."

She still has a few good jumps left, the crafter is currently working on new things to help boost her "instant" company to even larger proportions, like an exclusive, collectible interpretation of Noah's Ark.

Noah's Ark, expected to be out this fall, will be an original design by Bejma, made to look like very old pieces.

Anticipating another business boom, Bejma already "has her helpers" lined up to take over the job of putting the finishing touches on her pieces, which she still does herself. (Yes, on every piece)

BEJMA IS A graduate of Riverside High School in Dearborn Heights. She and her husband and teenage son and daughter have lived in Canton for 12 years.

Prices for Bejma's reproduction chalkware range from \$15 to \$250 based on detail, size and the cost of the mold used to produce the piece. Retail or wholesale customers may receive a color catalog by telephoning Walnut Ridge Primitives at 313-369-0.

Following are a few area shops that carry Bejma's chalkware:

- The Apple Wreath, 32626 West Seven Mile, Livonia.
- The Pickett Fence, 11 Forest Place, Plymouth.
- Plain and Fancy, 323 Main, Rochester.
- The Country Merchant, 42030 Grand River, Novi.



JIM JAGGFIELD/staff photographer

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