

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 piece 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 it that way 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, paints and other supplies, Bejma went to work. It wasn't easy, and it didn't happen on the first or second try.

'I really didn't anticipate the response we got. I just thought, well if we take a few orders, that'll be great.'

— Kathi Bejma

but, "I was bound and determined," said Bejma. "I was going to do it."

The finish alone took about 20 different tries. "I wanted 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 tables at folk-art shows, where she had been selling wood reproductions for the past 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 producing at that time," Bejma said. "I knew I was going 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 response we got," said Bejma. "I just thought, well if we take a few orders, that'll be great. I still had all

my regular craft and folk-art shows booked for that fall," she remembers.

What happened was overwhelming. "I had so many orders from the wholesale market, that I had to cancel all the shows," Bejma said. During the first half of 1988 Bejma had made only a few hundred pieces. In the six months after the wholesale market, she filled orders for over 12,000 chalkware reproductions.

"TRYING TO FILL the orders was just terrible," Bejma said. "But, I survived."

Walnut Ridge Primitives now employs 16 people, some of whom work out of their own homes, picking up pieces to paint and returning them to Bejma for the final touches.

Several sales representatives now work throughout the United States representing Bejma's chalkware.

Bejma has also increased her antique mold collection from the one reproduction mold she originally used, to about 200, 3 to 20-inch molds, including both reproduction molds and authentic antique molds.

Characters detailed by the molds include a number of Santas, rabbits, cats, dogs and other animals, all of which are now made into chalkware by Bejma's company.

"This all stems from doing only one wholesale market, twice a year, in the East," said Bejma, who looks forward to sending representatives to other markets this coming year.

If you're wondering, like I did, "How can this all really happen?" Bejma has the answer. "You have to make a decision, and jump in with both feet," she said, which is exactly what she did originally, by deciding

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 stockpiling pieces 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, too. 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 feelers out" for someone 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 981-3698.

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 JACOBSON/staff photographer

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