

A twinkle in her eye

Debra Parker Romero
By Nate Shelton
SA Editor



For sculptor Debra Parker Romero, a hardscrabble upbringing in rural Tennessee didn't provide much in the way of gifts or anything else that wasn't absolutely necessary. "There was no extra money for weekend trips to the toy store," she reminisced. "My family could barely afford clothing."

In fact, there was only one day each year when she could expect to receive a present,

making it a very special time indeed — and that was Christmas.

"For me, Santa and Christmas were sheer magic," said Romero, who now resides in Georgia and acknowledges that the holiday still has a special hold over her. The yuletide season certainly stands as the single largest influence on her body of work, which focuses almost exclusively on handcrafted, intricately decorated representations



Shadow Box Santa



Charlie, 6'-tall (life-sized)



Judd the Elf



Gnome Ornaments

sentations of the “right jolly old elf” himself.

“After I discovered my passion for sculpting, I was innately drawn to creating Santa Claus dolls, because they remind me of those happiest times in my life,” she said. Moreover, Christmas influenced Romero’s creative output from the beginning. “The very first decorative things I made were my own Christmas tree ornaments of paper chains, paper birds and salt dough...”

“It is a humbling reminder to unwrap some of these crumbling ornaments year after year when we decorate the family tree,” she added, “but it also brings me great joy to be reminded of making something from practically nothing and bringing that Christmas spirit to my own children.”

Much like her adoration of Christmas and Santa, Romero’s path to artistry began in childhood. “My grandmother taught me how to crochet and sew when I was little, and so began a lifelong passion for creating,” she said.

In the years that followed, she tried her hand at a number of different mediums, including stained glass, ceramics, painting,

woodworking, mold-making and calligraphy. Then came the fateful day when her late husband, who passed away this summer, gave her what turned out to be a life-defining anniversary present: a class on sculpting. “...I immediately fell in love with it,” she said, referring to the medium as her “true calling.”

Besides her Santa sculptures, Romero creates elf dolls and holiday ornaments, all of which “...are expressions of my fascination with all things Christmas.” (She also collected Santa dolls prior to sculpting them, and strives to find new, unique ornaments for her collection in every city she visits.)

To date, Romero has sculpted a veritable army of Santas, including her *pièce de résistance* – a 6-foot, life-size Saint Nick that would brighten any living room. So, how does she create her masterpieces?

“The first order of business is to sculpt the face, where my main focus is always in the expressive eyes,” she said. “If there was one signature style of my pieces, I would say that I strive to create kind, warm, expressive eyes. There has to be a twinkle, which isn’t easy to create.”

Romero has found that Santa

has many faces, and they can appear at unexpected moments and locations. As a result, she always comes prepared. “My husband ... was very patient in understanding that I used to chase little old men down the street to ask if I could photograph them for use in a future sculpture,” she said. “More often than not, the answer is ‘yes,’ fortunately.”

“Sometimes it’s just their kind eyes or interesting nose, and sometimes it’s the whole face. But I never leave my house without a camera in my bag!”

Once the face is complete, Romero tackles the hands, which she considers to be the most demanding part of any new piece. “Sculpting the face is always the joy – sculpting matching hands is the biggest challenge I face. It is technically difficult to create a matching set.”

Next comes the costuming, which she fashions using a wide range of materials. “I source my fabrics from all over the world, ... [including] Europe and beyond,” she said. “I try to source materials that make the piece truly one of a kind.”

As it turns out, the most time-consuming part of Romero’s creative process is the final step.

“Accessorizing takes the most time ... because finding pieces that are to scale and of good quality is not easy. Shopping for accessories is half the fun, though,” she said, adding, “Accessories come from all over too, and often when I cannot find exactly what I am looking for, I make it myself.”

Speaking of making, Romero takes pride in the fact that, outside of occasional help from a friend for embroidery, she crafts all of her dolls by hand at her home studio. “I have no staff to assist,” she said. “I do it all myself with very little exception.” Thankfully, her previous experience with various mediums continues to serve her well, allowing her to construct hand-turned wooden accessories, stained glass backgrounds and other details that give each doll a unique personality.

When she’s ready to create, Romero heads to her private workshop, which is so well appointed that it might even make Father Christmas green with envy. “I have worked to create my dream studio in

my basement, complete with sewing table, a massive work table, fabric display, accessories curio and an adjacent woodworking shop,” she said. “I do most of my work in this studio.”

Thanks to her efforts, Romero’s creations have been featured in several magazines and books, and she’s earned honors at juried art and craft events, including the Sugarloaf Crafts Festival in Virginia, which she’ll attend again this year. Furthermore, she’s been successfully exhibiting at shows for the past two decades – and attending them for an even longer period.

“My mother started dragging me to craft and doll shows when I was in my late 20s,” she said. “I was inspired by the work I saw at those shows, and that piqued my interest in creating my own work for sale.”

So far, her favorite show experience has been the annual holiday event at Château Élan, which is an exclusive community not far from her home. “...I was able to decorate the entire room with my work and showpieces,” she explained. “It

really gave buyers a sense of how my work might fit into their own holiday décor.”

As to the future, Romero says that she would like to try her hand at bronze casting, and she’s interested in adding nativity scenes to her oeuvre. Outside of that, she’s satisfied with bringing Christmas to life one doll at a time, and she expects to create more life-sized versions in the future. Furthermore, she loves getting commissions for customized Santas, which she’s willing to make in any requested size – and using anybody’s face.

“I have often been asked by clients to sculpt their husbands or other family members as Santa,” she said. “Most people would not commission a doll of someone in their normal clothing to be displayed year round, but to be dressed as Santa is kind of a tongue-in-cheek homage to their loved ones.”

More of Debra Parker Romero’s work and information about custom orders can be found on her website, www.oldworldstnicksonline.com. 🌟



Fireside Santa



Woodlands Santa