



# a Santa workshop

ARTIST FINDS HER CHRISTMAS SPIRIT IN SANTA DOLLS

by DIANE WHITE MCNAUGHTON

While some Scrooges may find it hard to believe in a weight-challenged, globe-trotting gift-giver in a red velvet suit, capable of shimmying down the narrowest of chimneys with bikes and X-boxes in tow, Diane Troutman makes Santa Clauses so lifelike, you'll be a believer.

In fact, Troutman, of North Middleton Twp., sculpts, costumes and poses one-of-a-kind Santa collectibles so exquisite, she has earned national recognition in crafts magazines and at trade shows, and was featured on HGTV's cable TV show "That's Clever."

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Thanks to Troutman's amazing attention to detail, her Santa dolls possess strikingly real azure eyes, complete with curled eyelashes — all hand-applied, tear ducts, and lifelike fingers complete with creased knuckles and weathered fingernails. Santa's facial expressions, carved in polymer clay, relay hauntingly genuine emotion, framed with real mohair beards and wigs. St. Nick's outfits are made of genuine leather and fur recycled from vintage coats, and the accessories, ranging from snowshoes and teddy bears to elves and owls, are equally authentic looking.

"Santa speaks a magical language to all people," Troutman said. "Some of my fondest childhood memories are of Christmas and my family's annual outing to visit Santa." Troutman has been creating the jolly old elf full time for about seven years, seven days a week, working year round. Before Troutman Originals, she had a graphic design business and made Santas on the side.

The majority of her Santas are ordered by Christmas stores, gift shops and boutiques, which typically order early in the year with delivery in the fall, so she is able to work on her creations all year.

Because of her painstaking attention to detail, she is only able to create about 50 Santas each year. Many take up to a week to complete. Her one-of-a-kind creations are so popular with retailers and collectors, she has a waiting list.

For the fourth year, Troutman will be the guest artist at Third Street Gallery in New Cumberland, this month and in December. Her Santas will be available for purchase at Third Street Gallery and at exclusive retailers across the country. Collectors can also contact her through her Web site at [www.troutmanoriginals.com](http://www.troutmanoriginals.com). Prices for her hand-sculpted Santas range from \$325 to \$2,000.

Troutman also has produced several resin editions of her original sculpts, which include small, full-figure Santas and gift items. For these, Troutman and her husband, Forrest, create the molds and pour the resin themselves. She then costumes and accessorizes them. The price range for resin items is between \$35 and \$225.

For custom orders, such as a soccer-playing Santa, she has a waiting list. "I have had collectors request a particular style, theme or setting, and other special requests, such as a special fabric, color

or prop and, time permitting, I try to meet most requests," Troutman said.

Her inspiration is usually a prop or accessory. Ideas are also sparked from fabrics, old reference books on Santa, and time-worn postcards with creative costuming ideas. Her favorite Santa is usually the last one she created, she said. But one has a special place in her heart. "I do have one Santa that I have created that I haven't parted with. He is called 'Santa's Big Top' and has a circus theme."

The circus-themed doll was recently selected to be in a Lark Publications book, "500 Handmade Dolls," that will be available in bookstores by the end of the year. He was also one of the Santas that Troutman created for the jury process allowing her to join the Original Doll Artist Council of America.

Troutman especially enjoys creating one-of-a-kind Santas. "I have total creative freedom when working on one-of-a-kind Santas," she said. "I get to go through my stash of toys and accessories looking for inspiration and dig through my mounds of fabric and trims to find just the right piece."

Like Santa and Mrs. Claus, Troutman has a loving spouse behind her. Her husband helps her with "all the things you can't see." He makes the armatures, stains bases, helps with shipping, and joins his wife in the resin and mold-making work. He also makes special accessories, such as walking sticks and little tables, and helps to search for such novelties as black and white 1-inch square tiles needed to create a floor to scale.

"I really couldn't do all that I do if it weren't for his help and support," Troutman said. "He doesn't get a day off either because when he is home he is working on what I'm going to need for the following week.

"As an artist, being creative is in my soul. It is part of my daily life," Troutman said. "My Santas are my art, and it brings me great personal reward when a collector chooses my art to purchase. I hope they feel they are purchasing more than just a Santa, but rather a Santa that has been completely handcrafted with a little bit of me in it."