

Why I believe in Fairies

The Art of Stephanie Blythe

By Jill Kaar Hanson

Photos By Stephanie Blythe unless otherwise noted

The "Teacup Fairy" is a delicate 5-inch fairy dressed in antique fabric. She naps in a beautiful teacup. That's how the career of Stephanie Blythe began.



I was not a child who looked for fairies. I didn't even know that there were *Green* or *Blue* or *Lilac Fairy Books*. I liked "Nana" better than "Tinkerbelle." My favorite "fairy story" was the story of the *Cottingley Fairies*, a series of five photographs taken by Elsie Wright (1901–88) and Frances Griffiths (1907–86), two young English cousins whose claim to have captured fairies on film at the bottom of their garden, caught the attention of the world, including Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

Then in 1989 I attended my first UFDC National Convention in St Louis. And my first salesroom – French *bébés*, German characters, mint-in-box Madame Alexander dolls from the 1950s. I could barely breathe.

Along the back wall the doll artists had their displays. Some worked in cloth, some in porcelain and some in what was a fairly new medium, synthetic clay. Then I walked into the booth of Stephanie Blythe and her business partner, Susan Snodgrass, and suddenly I believed in fairies.

On display were diminutive dolls dressed in antique fabrics and trims, napping in elegant teacups that would have been right at home at either of my grandmothers' afternoon teas. Each fairy sported a pair of real butterfly wings. My Imagination was captured.

A Short Bio

Stephanie Blythe is the middle child in a family of three girls. Her father was a scientist who left Germany at the rise of Hitler. He worked at Berkley University in California, where he met his wife, a student studying early childhood, and where Stephanie was born. When Stephanie was two the family moved to Frederick, Maryland, and at ten, to the suburbs in New Jersey. Her high school years were spent at Princeton High School with a year in Paris and Jerusalem while her father was on sabbatical. A degree in Textile Design from the Philadelphia College of Art led to a career in New York designing scarves and linens. Stephanie married Bob Blythe. They had had a son and then a daughter. The couple worked in the natural foods business, where Stephanie was in charge of graphics, package design and cooking lunch for a staff of 20. She published a magazine for her county and opened a school that provided private art lessons for children. A second marriage to Dean Walters, an antique dealer who specializes in wine collectibles, led to a move back to the West Coast. If life is a circle, then Stephanie's has been full, diverse and creative. There is just one problem—this is all just background.



Stephanie Blythe was elected to membership in NIADA in 1999.

The Artist

Stephanie Blythe is an incredibly talented and versatile artist and her style doesn't just come from her formal training, but rather from her diverse upbringing. Her father, who is one of Stephanie's inspirations, became an art collector during the latter part of his life, and many of the artists he knew visited and were entertained in the family home. He introduced his daughter to languages, foreign culture and cuisine, and to wonderful German toy

makers. All these added to her knowledge base as an artist. While living abroad in high school, she studied at the Bezeal Academy of Art & Design in Jerusalem. She intended to major in illustration in college, inspired by the master illustrators of children's literature of the early 20th century. Over the years Stephanie acquired a collection of these types of books as well as a vintage photo library. She created in any number of fields, art usable in the business world, but still unique.

Stephanie Blythe was given the honor of creating the 50th Anniversary gift at the NIADA Convention in 2014. Each "Merbaby" is a one-of-a-kind. Photo by Michael Puff



The "Sentinel" is a small sprite dressed in bits of nature. Each little imp has a set of real wings.
Photos by Dan Kvitka



"The Waltz" features a courtly bunny and a dainty fairy. This is one of the best examples of the whimsy that Stephanie Blythe captures in her art. *Photo by Michael Puff*



Then in 1979 a bee sting led to a meeting that was the start of a partnership that lasted over 15 years. After being stung Stephanie went to the home of a friend where his fiancé, Susan Snodgrass, was sorting antique lace. Stephanie loved fabric and trims. She actually had made and sold small fabric dolls with hand-painted faces while working in New York. Susan was already established in the world of miniatures; in fact she needed some help painting wallpaper for her current project. She asked Stephanie's help and the rest is "doll-world" history.

At first they made exquisite and detailed dollhouse dolls in the one-inch to one-foot scale. Stephanie is a perfectionist when it comes to the finished project, so each doll was meticulously researched and constructed. This made for very happy clients, but it did leave the artist in Stephanie feeling that there was something lacking. A perfect period piece doesn't leave much room for creativity.



This piece is entitled "Teatime." During her childhood, Stephanie spent hours in the woods creating fairy tea sets out of acorns. This little Elf, Teatime, appreciates the practice. *Author's Collection, Photo by Dan Kvitka*



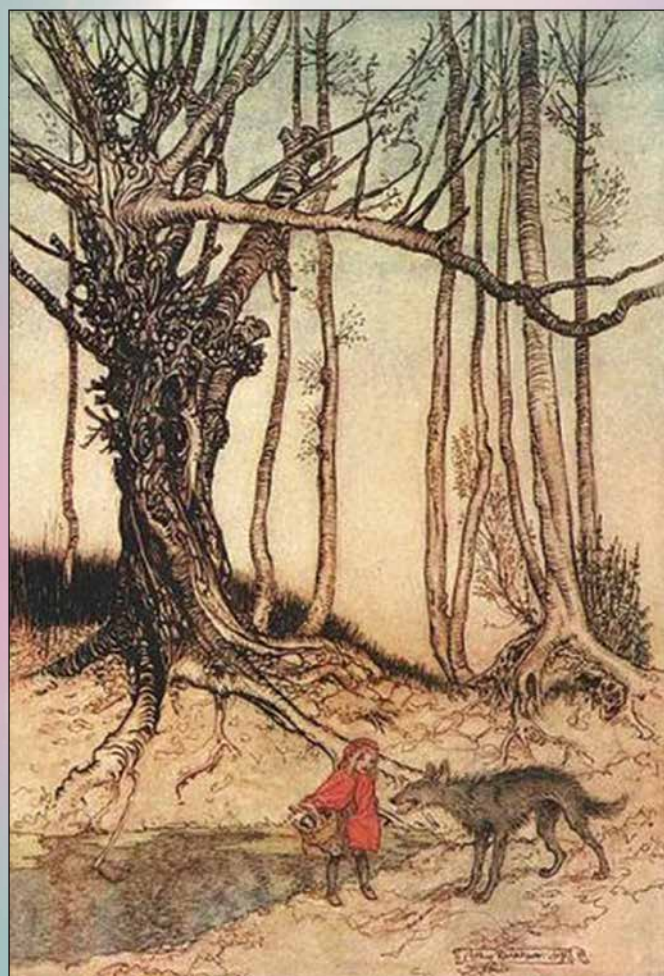
"Crystal Baby" by Blythe & Snodgrass showcases a different type of "natural materials."

These natural fairies look so real they actually blend with their background. The two friends share a cup of "Green Tea."





These trees were inspired by the illustrations of Arthur Rackham (1867-1939). The artist calls them "The Ents," a race of trees that inhabit J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle-earth.



Arthur Rackham is one of Stephanie Blythe's favorite illustrators.



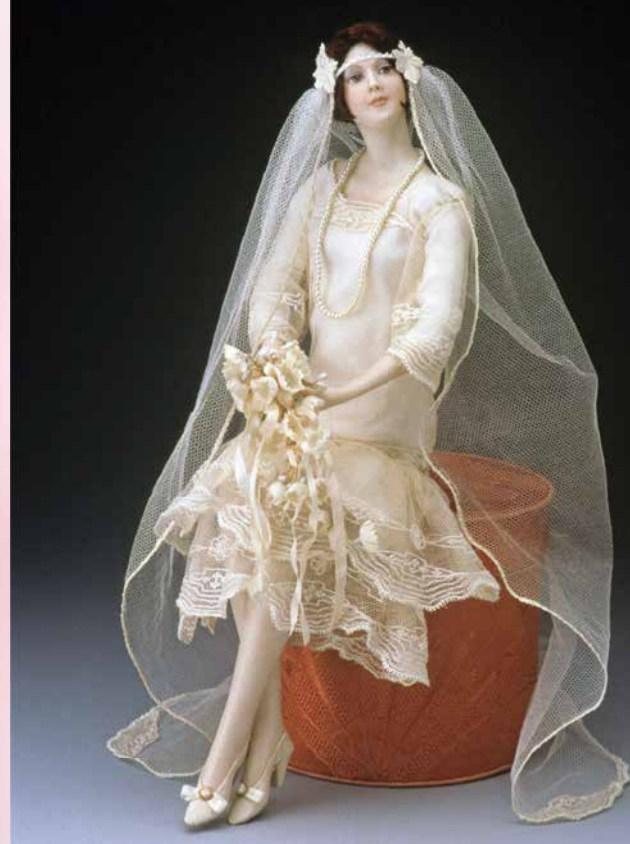
Her creation "Into the Woods," also shows the influence of Rackham.



"Estelle" is a socialite from the 1920s. The artist says she remembers as a small child, "I loved the tactile feel of velvet and the silks of my mother's dresses. She had a blue hat that had small velvet flowers all over. Some of the flowers had rhinestones. I would sneak up into her closet and remove a flower that I would then carry around in my pocket." *Photo by Peter Duvall*

That brings us back to those "Tea Cup Fairies" that took my breath away. In 1980, Blythe and Snodgrass started to produce the sprites they would become famous for. At first they purchased the porcelain for their dolls, then Stephanie learned to produce her own. The team showcased their fairies in domes, fairy gardens and, of course, teacups. Neighborhood children were hired to collect real insect and butterfly wings, the duo's signature finishing touch to their fairies. For 16 years Blythe & Snodgrass sold their dolls in dozens of shops around the world. When the duo parted ways, Stephanie was ready to strike out on her own.

During those years she had worked and studied to improve her sculpting, working out ways to individualize the sculptures after they came out of the molds. Sleeping fairies were joined by sprites, fairytale figures and elegant



Not all of Stephanie's petite creations were from the world of fairies. "Caroline" is a bride from the 1920s. She takes us back to when the artist did in-depth research of her dollhouse dolls. Please look carefully at the hems of the skirt layers and her minute shoe bows.



"Fern" captures Stephanie's love of both elegant fabrics and the look of nature's decorative touches.



Top left: "Marie had a Little Lamb" showcases the artist's antique lace collection.

Above: When asked if the nature or the doll comes first, Stephanie said, "It works both ways. I have a large collection of botanicals that I have collected. Often times one particular pod will inspire a doll, other times I will spread out an array of pieces and work with them until I find just the right ones." This is "Urchin Mom."

Left: "Equinox" is another theatrical representation of nature and the seasons.

ladies. Her use of natural materials expanded far beyond butterfly wings and when combined with her collection of antique fabrics, the look was truly unique. Blythe's work was far beyond a small doll you would add to a collection, each is a work of art, a one-of-a-kind creation. Stephanie had risen to the highest level of doll making. She was elected to membership in the National Institute of American Doll Artists – NIADA, Class of 1999. Life is a circle and Stephanie's has been full, diverse and creative.

Of Fairies & Magic

So why fairies? Stephanie says it started because she was almost always the smallest person in her class. She was drawn to small delicate things. While living in Maryland as a child, she had free reign of the fields and forest around her home. She shared this adventuresome life with two imaginary friends, Honalona and Bumblebum, who were her constant companions. She says she is attracted to iridescent things with wings. What if you ask the artist if she believes in magic? In fairies? She simply replies – "Oh yes." What a lucky thing for all of us. 🧚

The Kiss is a series of sculptures that were inspired by Gustav Klimt's painting of the same title. This is "Masquerade."



Stephanie pours her porcelain in molds that she makes herself. Then she re-sculpts each one and hand paints it. This close-up of "Solstice" highlights the depth of detailing the artist insists on.

Beginning in 1999, Stephanie has created this interwoven couple in a variety of eras and characters. Each couple requires the production of nine molds to allow the embrace to come to life. Here is "Amorous Liaisons."





The artist points out that this is the most complicated piece she has ever created. When you consider the sculpture is then adorned with meticulously researched costumes, it is easy to see why this is Stephanie Blythe's "masterpiece." Here the artist captures "A Fairy Kiss."

A Midsummer Night's Dream is perhaps the ultimate salute to the world of the fairies. Another quote by Shakespeare, from *Hamlet*, is one of Stephanie Blythe's touchstones, "This above all; to thine own self be true." Photo by Hap Sakwa



"Pansy" is a wonderful example of a fairy that curls up for a nap in something other than a teacup.



"Madam Viola" is a more complex vignette featuring a gypsy fortune-teller. One of the cards in the drawer says: "One of the Happiest Moments in Life Is When you Find the Courage to Let Go of What You Cannot Change." Photo by Michael Puff



"Petit Gateaux" is a wonderful name for these tiny cakes just made to serve with tea.



"Sweetie Pies," Stephanie's newest creations, were introduced at the 2016 NIADA Conference. Instead of one artist making 100 dolls, ten members each made ten dolls. Stephanie's little gifts are made of porcelain and clothed in the remnants from her extensive fabric collection. The little one third from the left, in front, is from the author's collection. *Photo by Peter Duvall*

