

Homespun Historical Treasures

With Christine LeFever's dolls, all things from the long ago are made new once more.

by Linda White-Francis

Christine LeFever delights in constructing the past with charming old style dolls. Reinventing history for avid doll collectors and early Americana decorators is the heart and soul of her gift to the world.

LeFever's forté in most everything she does always has to do with revival of an earlier period, most specifically the 18th and 19th centuries. "I'm especially intrigued with the 1800s," notes the dollmaker, who has been trained in the decorative arts of Early America.

Clever and meticulous, LeFever hand-makes stunning papier-mâché dolls using actual dolls from 1840 to 1860 as the basis for most of her papier-mâché busts. Her handsome molds capture the distinctive facial features and hairstyles of dolls of the period.

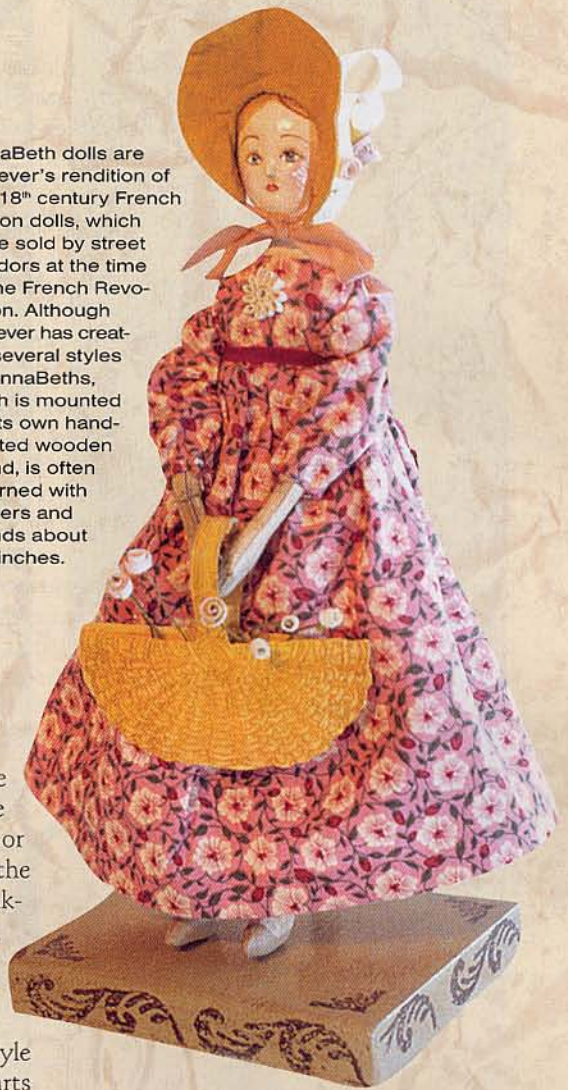
Early antique papier-mâché dolls were first produced in 1810, but in 1858 Ludwig Greiner decided to patent his own papier-mâché heads, which were molded with paper, whitening rye flour and glue, and made less breakable with muslin and linen.

Above: An 1858 Greiner from LeFever's collection is the inspiration behind the Hannah dolls. Like the original, the Hannah doll's bust is of papier mâché, while the body and the limbs are of cloth. About 30 inches tall, it's the largest doll made by LeFever. Right: A lover of fairy tales, LeFever has featured apparel such a red riding hood on this doll, one of the Amy series the talented artisan has created.





AnnaBeth dolls are LeFever's rendition of the 18th century French carton dolls, which were sold by street vendors at the time of the French Revolution. Although LeFever has created several styles of AnnaBeths, each is mounted on its own hand-crafted wooden stand, is often adorned with flowers and stands about ten inches.



LeFever also has produced peg wooden dolls using wood carving tools and a scroll saw. "They're very labor intensive, so I haven't made many of them," the dollmaker says. "My preference is definitely the papier mâché."

Using antique originals as a starting point, LeFever strives to re-create the charm of the rare antique dolls. "I craft the dolls to appear aged. The sewing techniques I use are a reflection of the original. I run the gamut from very primitive attire to the high Victorian fashions," explains the artist, who employs vintage fabric whenever possible, but is not opposed to aging the newer fabrics when necessary.

"My 'girls' are prepared especially for those who take pleasure in an old-fashioned look," LeFever notes. She uses papier-mâché pulp that takes several days to

dry. After removing the bust from the mold, she sands and refines its surface before painting it with either acrylic or oil paints. Painting the face is one of the most significant aspects of the dollmaker's craft. After painting the facial features, LeFever delicately ages each head to enhance the doll's vintage appearance, and then varnishes it to protect its finish. Depending on the style of doll, LeFever constructs the body parts of papier mâché or fabric, and uses a dyeing process to make them appear old as well. These dolls often have fancywork accoutrements such as pincushions or floral bouquets, which she also hand crafts.

A humble person, LeFever is always fascinated when told her dolls are considered collectibles. "I never thought of my dolls in that way," she says, even though she has received national recognition for dollmaking and her folk art/chalk ware figures and primitive paintings have been featured in magazines

such as *Early American Life*, *Country Living*, *Country Collectibles* and *Holly Berry Hill Catalog*.

LeFever's husband, Greg, is not as modest about his wife's accomplishments. "Christine has been selected as one of the top 200 members of the Early American Life 2004 Traditional Crafts Directory," he proudly reports. "This is a real honor for her because the craftspeople are selected by a jury of curators from Colonial Williamsburg, Sturbridge

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Village, Shelburne Museum and other notable historic organizations. To be selected, a craftsperson must create high-quality, distinctive, handmade items at the highest level of craftsmanship. It's like winning an Academy Award in the crafts field."

It's clear LeFever is emotionally invested in her work. "You might think it strange," she reveals sheepishly, "but before I send a doll off to its new owner, I give it a hug."

"My dolls are for those who love the past and want to grace their homes with a sense of love and innocence that only a doll can bring. I'm not a purist like some, but my dolls reflect my love for antiques. They are accent pieces and look sweet peeking out of a cupboard or nestled in a miniature chair," explains the dollmaker, who credits fellow dollmakers/designers of the same genre Gail Wilson and Nicol Sayre for inspiring her own doll art.

LeFever's decorating talents beautifully complement her doll art. When she's not pursuing one passion, she's likely indulging in the other, with equal success and recognition. Her former home in Oregon, for instance, was featured in *Country Living* and *Country Collectibles* magazines, as well as several Hearst Publications interior-designer books.

LeFever's tastes are a pleasing blend of heartland Americana, nurtured and grown over a lifetime of traveling around

LeFever's Emma dolls are based on an 1820 milliner's model the dollmaker acquired several years ago. The dolls closely resemble the 13-inch original, with papier-mâché heads and limbs, and cloth bodies. The reproduction dolls are clothed in a wide range of authentic period apparel.



different parts of this country. Born in Spokane, Washington, in 1947, LeFever and her family—a dad who was employed by the Kellogg's Company, a mom and seven siblings—moved many times throughout the dollmaker's childhood. She has lived from one side of the United States to the other. "I remember once preparing for yet another transfer, when my dad got rid of all my dolls and toys but one. The doll survives today because she was tucked away in a drawer in my bedroom. Her name is Robin and she is behind glass now."

The self-described Bohemian tells of a childhood on the West Coast, her marriage in Michigan, moving with her husband and young daughter to Vermont for nearly five years, then moving to Portland, Oregon, with her husband, daughter and baby son, and now returning to the Midwest. "By now I think I could live in any state," she says.

For now, though, home base is the village of Lynchburg, Ohio, 50 miles east of Cincinnati, in a house built in 1833. Christine and Greg have been married 35 years and have two grown children, Brigitte and Simon, and are grandparents to one grandson, Alexander, 12, Brigitte's son.

For most of her life LeFever has had a passion for dolls of all types. At one time her collection was diverse until she decided to sell most of them in order to concentrate on early dolls of the 1700 and 1800s. "I have always been intrigued by the everyday domestic life of women of that era. My collection now consists of peg woodens, Greiners, Superiors, old rag dolls, milliner's models and one or two porcelains. My ultimate favorite type doll is the cloth primitives of true earlier times.

"I am greatly inspired by drawings and paintings such as those depicted in old publications like *Godey's Lady's Book*, and Eliza Leslie's *American Girl's Book*, which I am lucky enough to own," she continues, clearly warming up to one of her favorite subjects.

Putting a business spin to her passion only happened recently, however. It was less than a year ago—about the time she and Greg moved to Ohio—that she began actively marketing her early-style dolls. She launched her business with a selection of reproduction milliner's models and Greiners, and has steadily expanded her offerings since then. "I have been doing this for only one year, but it has been 50 years in the making," LeFever confides.

The result is a labor of love that unites LeFever's love of dolls, her appreciation of history, and her amazing talent as a true folk artist to create unique dolls of the past for doll collectors of today. ■

The Claire dolls are fashioned after an M & S Superior doll from LeFever's private collection. They have papier-mâché busts, and cloth bodies and limbs. Dressed in period clothes, Claire dolls are about 15 inches tall.

