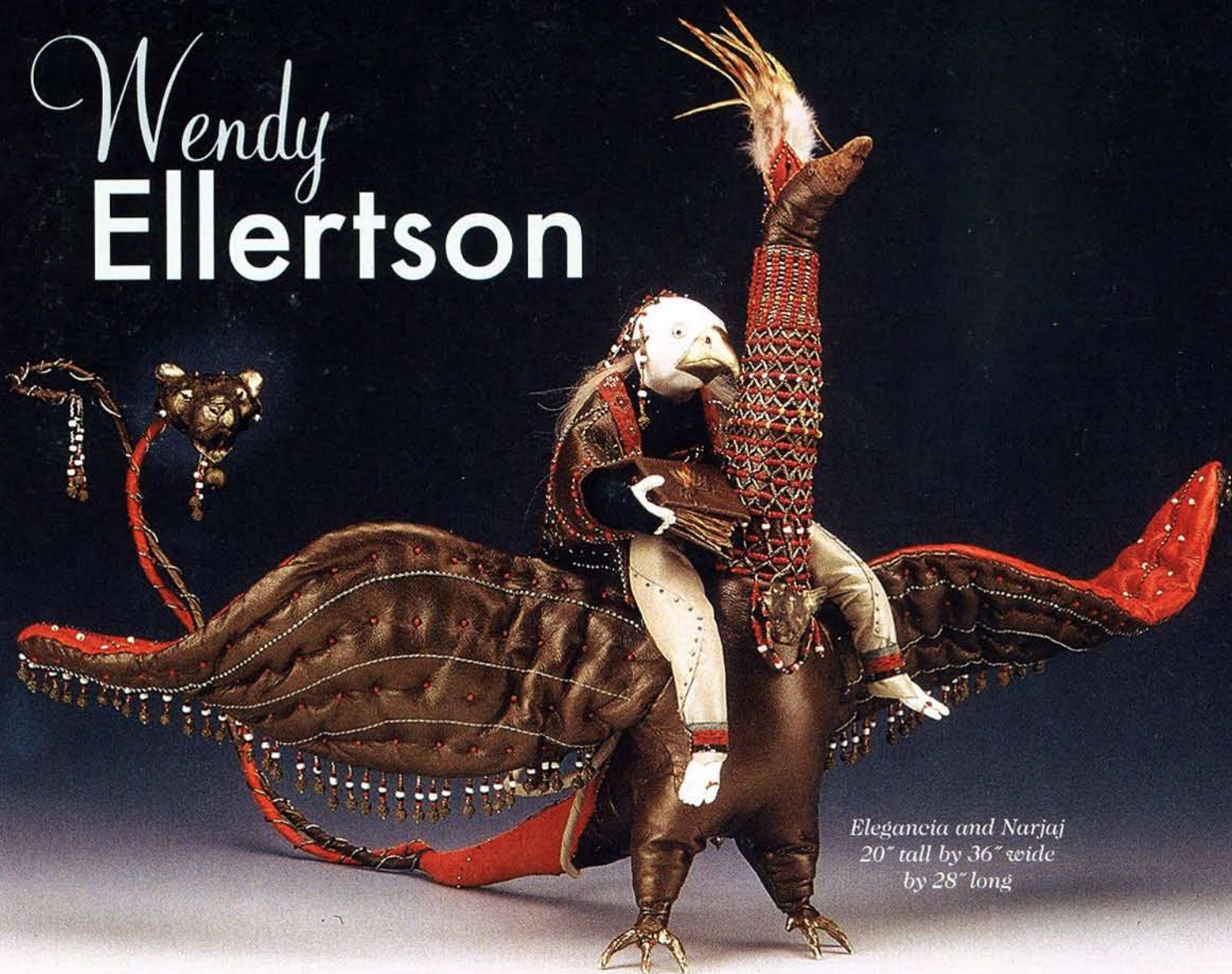


Wendy Ellertson



Elegancia and Narjai
20" tall by 36" wide
by 28" long

by Ricc Freeman-Zachery

For Wendy Ellertson, inspiration is everywhere. Her list of sources is both impressively wide-ranging and richly fascinating: "Mexican serapes; Picasso, Michelangelo; David Smith; African masks; Bosch; Dr. Seuss; Robert J. Lee; the Alhambra; gargoyles; Portobello Street; dolls by Barbara Newman; the Names Quilt Project; Dorothy Liebes; New Orleans Jazz; Carl Sandburg; e.e.cummings, peace demonstrations, bus rides and snorkeling in Ecuador; rafting in the Bald Eagle preserve in Alaska with my mother and aunt who were both in their 80s; a lot of flying in my dreams. And finally, a strong belief that as artists we have an obligation to open ourselves to help circle back some of the creative energy that has been lost to the world, to share it and encourage the creativity of others."

For Wendy, inspiration is about the interconnectedness of everything in the universe, a synthesis embodied in her fabulous mythical figures of storytellers and adventurers and Star Wanderers. These creatures, with their not-quite-human heads and their remembered-from-a-magical-dream companion beasts, are themselves a synthesis of the many media in which Wendy has worked in the decades since her first art trade at age 10. She has made leather clothing and constructed books, thrown pottery and created soft sculpture. Now she combines these skills in creating figures with fired ceramic faces, leather clothing, and wire-armature bodies covered with hand-stitched muslin and embellished with stitching and beads and a wonderful assortment of materials gathered "anywhere and everywhere."

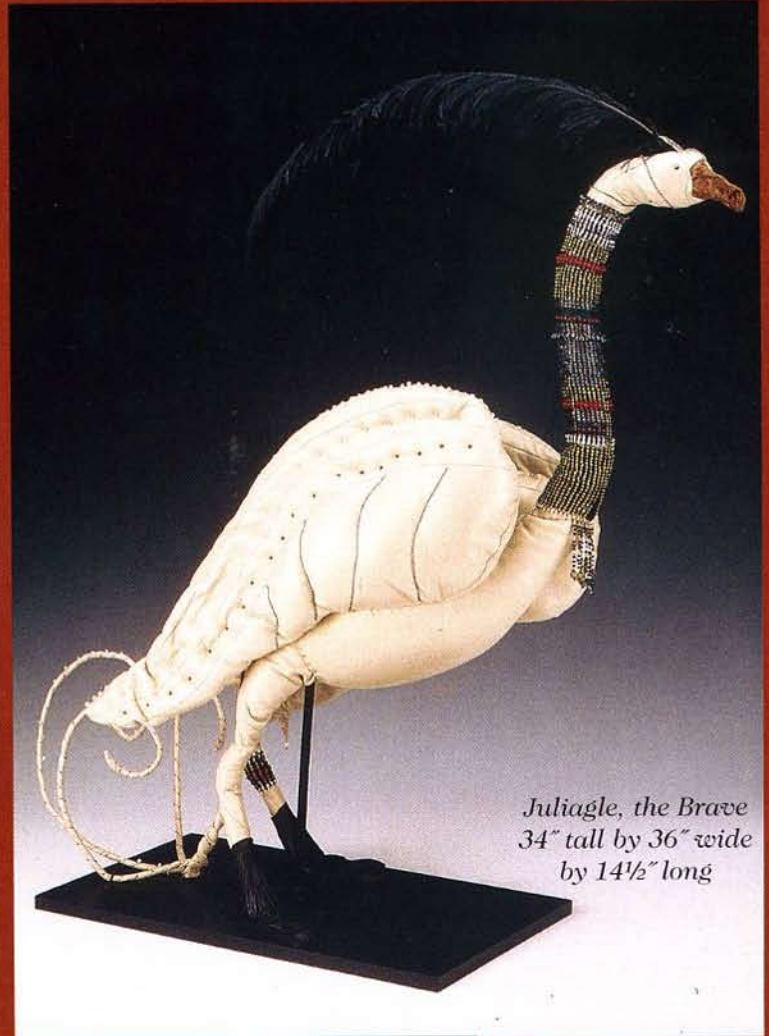
DOLL ARTIST Profile

“Whenever I travel, I’m always looking for possibilities,” Wendy explains. “I was walking by a saddle shop in Cuenca, Ecuador — the hometown of my son-in-law — when I spotted some miniature wood carved bases for saddles. I picked up some of them, and for the first time some of my figures began to ride with saddles.”

Wendy is on the board of the Interstitial Arts Foundation, a group of artists whose work can’t be easily categorized. Interstitial, meaning something that exists in the tiny spaces between closely related things, is about what goes on in these gaps: the gap between figure making and storytelling, in Wendy’s case, or between storytelling and journal making, another of her passions. After discovering the IAF, Wendy attended the 2006 biennial conference of Mythic Journeys, an exploration of the mythic imagination. She loves Joseph Campbell’s words about the role of the artist being to mythologize the world.

“What’s been challenging and interesting to me is that it’s pushed me to do more writing for my work,” she says. “I’ve always written the beginnings of stories about the work. What the conference did was encourage me to go further. It’s interesting to see if I can write the way I do the artwork, to just get out of the way.”

Wendy says the writing itself doesn’t come easily to her, although storytelling has been a →



Juliagle, the Brave
34" tall by 36" wide
by 14½" long



Ragialle, the Outrageous
22½" tall by 39" wide
by 34" long

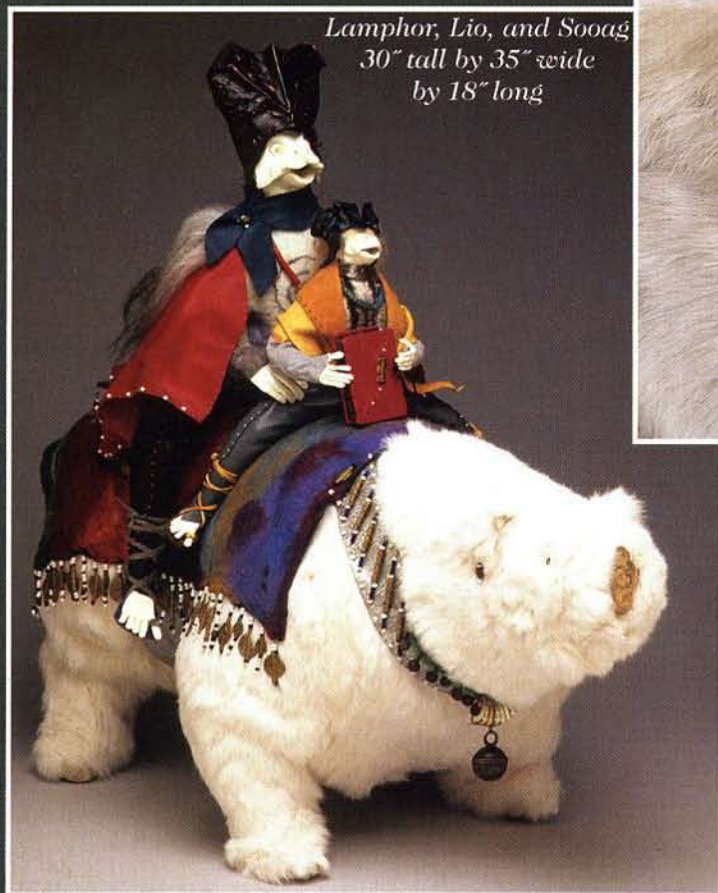
DOLL ARTIST Profile



Aifos and Kayah
29" tall by 27" wide
by 20" long

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Lamphor, Lio, and Sooag
30" tall by 35" wide
by 18" long



*Whenever I travel,
I'm always looking for possibilities.*

part of her life since her childhood, when her father and grandfather would weave stories to entertain her. When her family moved from San Francisco, where she was born, to Chicago, Wendy was introduced to museums and artists whose lives were "lifted up as the ideal." With a degree in international relations and a master's in French, Wendy was prepared for a life in academia but realized, very early on, that "art saves the world." So she began to learn everything she could about this salvation.

She took pottery instruction from Toshiko Takaezu, an internationally known potter who, at 78, is still working. She bought a potter's wheel and began doing production pottery. In 1975, she was juried into her first American Craft Council show.

"I love the rhythm of throwing on the wheel and doing production potting. But to be a production potter you need to throw on a regular basis all the time," she says.

Although Wendy was creating wonderful pottery, it was not her only love. She was doing a lot of soft sculpture, especially dragons, and she couldn't abandon those to throw pots full time. She came to a realization: "There are a lot of production →



Ghan and Soff
26" tall by 25" wide
by 16" long

DOLL ARTIST Profile



Alair
18" wide

pottery, and not a lot of people who can make the figures that I make." It was time to make a decision. She took a workshop with Lenore Davis, who casually mentioned that she thought Wendy would really enjoy working in leather, which opened up yet another avenue for her. One of the earliest leather creations was a 10-foot-long dragon with a rider on its back. Then, after viewing a 1400 BC loincloth in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, she began making leather garments and scarves.

"From the ages of 40 to 50, I was a clothing designer," Wendy says. "But it felt increasingly like not really me. At 50, I was getting more contemplative." She began

making leather books, journals and albums. She wasn't sure exactly where this interest in working with leather was taking her and was just kind of going along with the experience.

"And then once again the figures came back more strongly," she says.

These days, although she still makes leather journals and clay masks, she's chosen to focus on what she feels she does best: creating detailed mythical figures with histories and stories and lives all their own."

Wendy lives and works in Boston, in the inner-city neighborhood of Roxbury, where she and her husband



Philosophet
16" tall



Figure with Mask
14" tall



Heliagia
28" tall

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9" tall
and
12" tall

moved as grad students in the mid-1960s when they left their Beacon Hill apartment.

"In the apartment, we had to walk a block to see a tree," Wendy recalls. "My husband was raised on a farm outside Portland, Oregon, and it was hard for him to handle that."

In their neighborhood, where they've now lived for 40 years, they know people and families and history and have helped create a community complete with a garden and, at one point, a dozen banty hens nesting in the trees in their backyard. Wendy loves the sense of interconnectedness and community, from the kids she works with in an after-school program to the people she greets when she takes her dog on long walks that provide her with exercise and daily inspiration she takes back home to her second-floor studio.

"It's like a nest," she says of the studio, musing that none of her workspaces have ever been at ground level. She attributes her love of a cozy aerie to her fascination with birds and flying, pointing out that many cultures

have myths about women who can transform themselves into birds.

"I've always dreamed about flying," she says wistfully. Her dynamic figures reflect her love of flying and movement and are meant to be posed and manipulated. "I want people to be able to interact with them. I want an interactive process and a sort of a playful process — I'm very big on play."

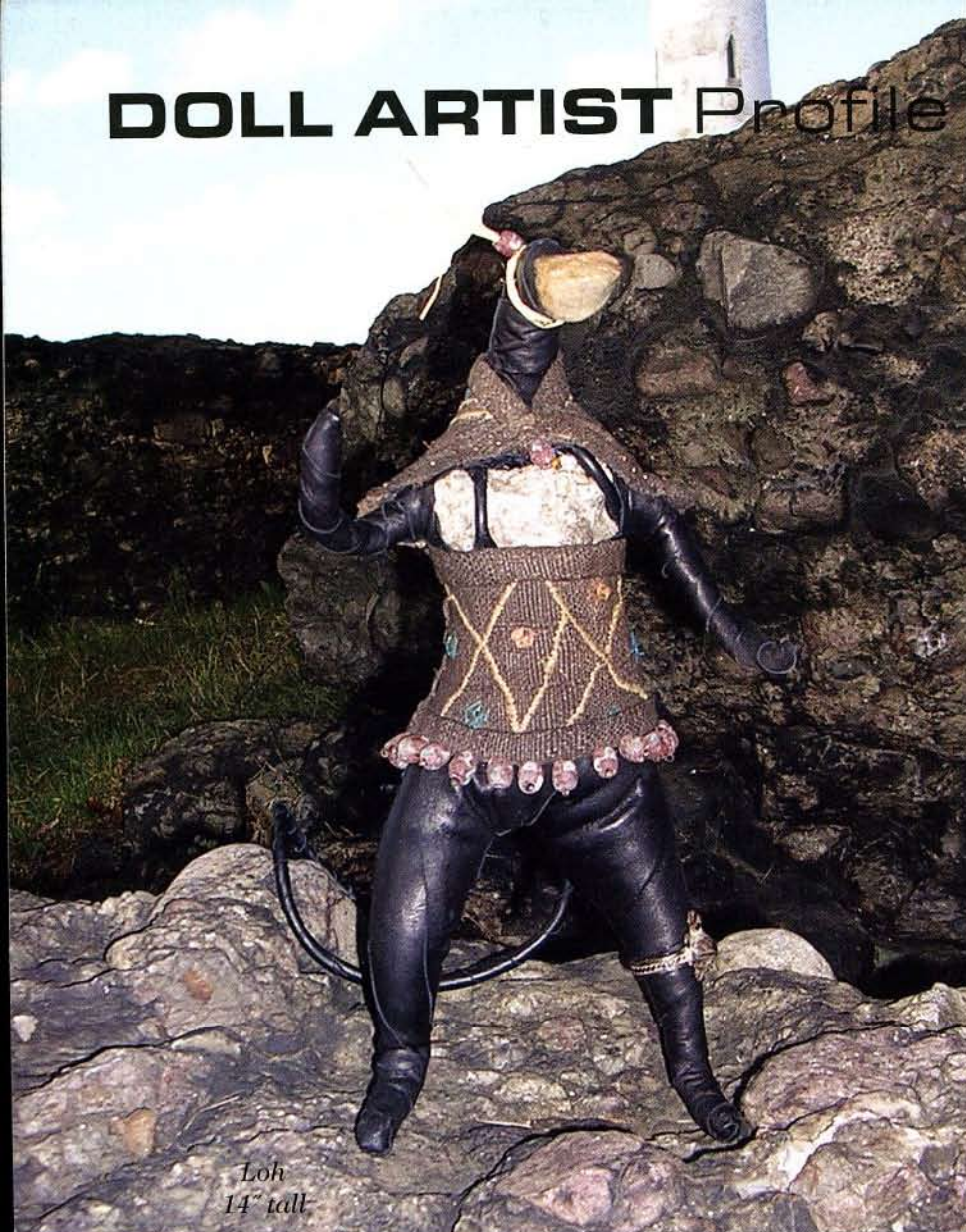
Her studio walls are covered with photos of her extended family — one that has nothing to do with biology — and friends and people she admires. "And all these little bits and pieces so I can see it and pick and choose from it, and to feel a connection with other who do handwork," she says.

Among the bits and pieces is an abundant collection of antique fabric.

"I feel like when you work with an old textile, it's almost like you can feel the hands of the people who made this before you," Wendy explains.

When she incorporates pieces of work from →

DOLL ARTIST Profile



Loh
14" tall

She attributes her love of a cozy aerie to her fascination with birds and flying, pointing out that many cultures have myths about women who can transform themselves into birds.

another culture, she first does research to make sure she knows what this scrap might have meant to the person who created it, and then she carefully incorporates the piece into her own work, noting "I really try to honor that culture and all the work that went into that piece."

In beginning her own work, Wendy starts each new piece by first forming the head.

"I don't really have an idea first," she confesses. "If I'm going to use clay, I do a bunch of clay heads, maybe 12 to 18. I won't use all of them. I'll use the ones that are saying, 'Helloooooo, make me!'"

She then builds an armature out of coated copper wire and wraps that with polyester batting and then thread and then a layer of hand-stitched muslin.

"And then they sit around sometimes" while Wendy plays with the materials in her studio, handling the textiles or hand-felting fabric for carpet that will become the base for a storyteller.

"One guy sat in the corner of my studio for about three years," Wendy recalls. "It depends on how fast a show's coming up."

She does about nine shows a year, including the American Craft Council shows, and is always thinking ahead to make sure she has enough pieces for each one. After the figures are constructed, Wendy begins the process of embellishing them, from hand-stitching the leather to sewing on the beads and adding embroidery stitches.

"I have a hard time not adding something to things," she says with a laugh. "Frequently the issue is when to *stop* embellishing. I'll say, 'Wendy, you really just need to stop right now!'"

So she forces herself away from the embellishing and onto the accessories. She makes the intricate masks and works on the carpet and trunk and all the bits and pieces that go into the trunk, and then she

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creates the tiny book that travels with the figure.

"There are always a few pages left blank at the back, since they're still collecting their stories," Wendy says. "When I finish a piece, it's not finished. I want people to add to it. It's not mine anymore. It's waiting to start a new journey with somebody else."

She encourages her buyers to make the figures a part of their family, adding to the story she's provided, because, "When they travel, they bring back pieces and add to it and it becomes a part of their family story." Wendy believes that what we put out into the world is important and that, by creating art and sending it out into the world, she's helping spread positive energy.

"Art changes the world every bit as much as politics," she says, "and it's every bit as necessary. Life is unfair, and horrible things happen to really good people. But, fundamentally, life is worth living, and we have an

obligation to make it a little bit better place when we leave than when we came in, and to celebrate and to savor each moment."

For Wendy, art is the process to make that happen. ❖

To see more of Wendy's work, go to www.ellertson.com. She can be reached by snail mail at 76 Thornton Street, Boston, MA 02119, or by calling her studio at (617) 785-8750. She welcomes e-mail at wendy@ellertson.com

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*Al and Ghero
12" tall*