



The Green Scene

A host of bear artists prove that respect for nature and a reverence for Mother Earth help to build a better bear.

By Stephanie Finnegan

When Jessica Van Antwerp's beloved grandfather passed away, her mother thought about hiring someone to make a bear out of his favorite flannel shirt. Young Jessica volunteered to do it instead and began to study how to make a bear. Her first attempt at bear making was a success, and her grandfather's spirit must have aided her in realizing she had a brand-new talent and natural ability.

Since then, Van Antwerp (vanantwerp bears.com) has confidently mastered the craft.



Teddy bears quite commonly come in beige and browns—it's a salute to the ways of nature. Whites are a nice wintry change of pace and, of course, pinks and blues fit into every nursery scheme. In 2008, though, the color that is blossoming everywhere is green. Even though the bears in question might still be tan, ebony, cream-colored and pastel, in their hearts they are green—as in recyclable, renewable and reclaimed. Kermit the Frog might have sung that it's not easy being green, but an environmentally aware band of bear artists believes otherwise.

This year, fashionable collectors everywhere will learn that green

is the new hot trend in choosing bears and their buddies. It makes perfect sense: Teddy bears pay homage to the denizens of the earth, and their materials should be eco-friendly and socially sound.

"With the amazing amount of materials already out there, it seems a shame not to use the resources we have," cautions Shelly Lampshire of Shelly Lampshire Originals. "If I need something,

or if I have something I don't need, I call a friend and we trade. Everyone is happy, and nothing goes to waste. Every single

Above: From fine artist and teddy bear enthusiast Anouk Johanna (wearablebears.com) comes her line of fossilized and ivory tusk creations. The artist emphasizes that her ivory tusks are not harvested from contemporary creatures, but rather are thousands of years old. The "Little Bear" display piece consists of fossilized mammoth ivory, 2½ inches in diameter, which is up to 12,000 years old. Its stand is made from Brazilian cocobolo wood, a renewable natural resource.

scrap is saved for a friend who works in miniatures. All of us work in such different scales, so we save items as a surprise for one another. Every day on the earth is a gift, and we need to treat it as such."

Warm Wishes

Before PETA became a household name, and animal rights activism a daily part of the evening news, fur coats were a social-status symbol, a way to show that a husband and his wife had "made it" financially. Buying a woman a fur coat for her anniversary, a romantic special occasion or as a holiday gift was the pinnacle of American success. Richard Nixon famously pooh-poohed the notion of fur coats when he publicly talked about his



Ginger Brame's "Junkyard Sprites" (pieceparade.com) make use of household items, discarded objects and forgotten castoffs. These unexpected earth-friendly fairies demonstrate the artist's ability to turn mundane items into magical treats. "Florsheim," shown here, boasts wings that once served as shoe horns, and its chapeau is an old salt-shaker lid.

wife, Pat, and her respectable cloth coat, eschewing the trappings of ostentatious wealth. Though Nixon might have turned a blind eye to chinchillas and sables, the rest of the country was mad for mink.

Fast-forward to the 1980s, and a new sensibility had come to town. Vegetarianism and healthful living weren't just fads anymore. They were

lifestyles that were becoming more and more commonplace and acceptable. Likewise, the fight for animals, and the cry to cease the fur trade, was heard more loudly and more openly. What, then, to do with fur coats that might have been hanging in Grandma's closet or Aunt Wanda's wardrobe?

"All of my fur bears are created from recycled fur coats or stoles. I find them at the local thrift shops or yard sales here in Palm Beach County," Jane Woodward of Heir Bears proudly states. "Many retirees from 'up north' come to this area, bringing their once-fashionable furs with them. They find the lifestyle here is much

too casual and too warm. So, their furs eventually find their way to the Goodwill or other charity thrift shops. If I did not rescue these furs, they would hang up there for months, getting dusty and dirty. Then they would eventually end up in a landfill."

Kathy Myers of Vintage Mink Bears wholeheartedly agrees. "I've been specializing in recycling vintage mink coats, stoles and collars into teddy bears and other animals for the past 20 years. It's

"Libby" is 18 inches and made from a variety of reclaimed and recycled objects. "Her gray fur coat was from a vintage thrift store coat, and its cotton backing behaves much like mohair," asserts Michelle Lamb (oneandonlybears.com). "Her pale blue dress was taken from a doll I found at a flea market."



Kathy Myers (designedbykm@ca.rr.com) recycled vintage mink to make her alluring panda bear. She hand sculpted the panda's flowers from polymer clay.

probably due to the fact that I've been a vegetarian for nearly 40 years. I have always believed that re-creating the old vintage furs into artist teddies allows the 'spirit' of the original animal to live on."

The notion of honoring the animals that sacrificed their lives to provide their pelts is a fierce feeling among these fur-centric artists. "I have always felt when making recycled fur bears that it is my way to give life back to the animals. Many collectors have said that my fur bears look like they are alive again. Because of that, I named my business Alive Again Bears," affirms Sherri Creamer. "Many of my customers feel that this is a great use for old fur coats, rather than wearing them or simply discarding them."

Rhonda Lynn Ridgeway of Kozy Kabin began recycling fur coats in 1995, starting as a hobby. "I turned my grandfather's vintage fur coat from the 1930s into a treasured family heirloom. Even the buttons from the coat were used to

adorn my teddy. A keepsake for each member of the family was created," she explains. "When I showed my teddy at my workplace, I began receiving orders from friends, and then their friends. They all requested that their family fur coats be transformed into teddies. Coats that had hung in the backs of closets and had been forgotten were now being pulled forward. These cast-off coats were put to use once again, and nobody felt good



Above: "Josias" is only 3 inches tall, but he is loaded with charisma. Made from a rayon long-pile vintage drapery fabric, he has been distressed to look old and to blend in with some worn spots in the fabric. Edie Barlishen (bearsbyedie@hotmail.com) topped him off with a distressed bow from rayon ribbon and an old jingle bell.

"Cassie" by Sue Pendleton (bluebearytreasures.com) is a study in ingenuity. She was crocheted from alpaca yarn taken from a vintage sweater. Her outfit was sewn by the artist from a vintage lace-trimmed pillowcase and was further embellished with embroidery and tiny pearl beads.



about throwing away or donating these forgotten coats. At one time, this was Grandma's treasured fur coat, and a family shouldn't part with it."

Sometimes an artist's reputation for salvaging materials and working with fur follows them to the most unlikely places. Judi Paul of Luxembears had an ursine encounter while at her doctor's appointment. "One of the nurses asked me if I would be interested in buying a fur coat she no longer wanted. I didn't have the heart to say no, so I offered her \$50 for it. It hung in my closet for over a year, and then inspiration came. I've made many bears over the years from other people's heirlooms."

Woodard has the last word on the practicality and emotionality of preserving these furs and granting them a second chance. "Every item that is thrown away requires energy to process and dispose of it. We can save energy by finding new uses for discarded items. Shopping at the thrift stores gives a new life to these once-stylish furs, accessories and other pieces of clothing. Plus, buying at a thrift store often benefits a charity. If a collector brings personal mementoes and vintage or antique pieces to you, then it brings back pleasant and meaningful memories for them. All of this sounds win-win to me!"

Trinkets, Treasures and Teddies

"Recycling materials is something all pack rats such as myself do as a matter of course. It's as automatic as breathing," confides Mary Jardin Wimberley of Mary's Secret Garden. "Old wool and alpaca coats from the thrift store become long bunny ears, and old leather jackets become boots, eyeglasses, satchels and so on. I keep old jewelry in a box that is pulled out for certain pet projects, like my 'Pirate Cat.' Goodness, how could I have made the treasure chest without all my old goodies? I also collect old laces, trim, handkerchiefs, runners, baby clothes and buttons. I utilize all of them! I like the challenge of restricting myself to using supplies found exclusively in my personal stash. I could support quite a few artists for years with my substantial pile of stuff."

A spirit of camaraderie exists among the teddy bear community, especially when it comes to revitalizing and re-imagining



Above: "I have piles of antique goods, toys and tins that I collect from all over the world," remarks Sharon Hale (shazbears@yahoo.ca). "I love to use old costume jewelry and heirloom lace. I also use steel in my bears to make them heavy. It comes from tips of nails that ordinarily would be thrown away."

"I have always believed that re-creating the old vintage furs into artist teddies allows the 'spirit' of the original animal to live on."

passed-over and half-remembered articles. The artists are quick to assist one another in finding much-needed accessories to complete a vignette and to turn a mundane collectible into a memorable heirloom.

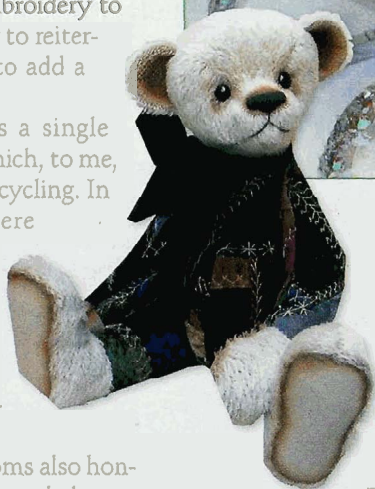
"Using previously owned objects is often key to making my bears have a 'history,' and therefore they have a soulful appeal. I hardly ever use the reclaimed objects 'as is,'" Michelle Lamb of "One&Only" Bears attests. "In the case of my bear 'Libby,' I patiently added antique lace salvaged from another garment onto the doll dress, which I found at a flea market, and added coral embroidery to the quilt. I did this not only to reiterate the color accents, but to add a bit of chic to the shabby."

"My bear's blankie was a single square from an old quilt, which, to me, is the ultimate symbol of recycling. In the olden days, quilts were made using scraps of used clothing, and her hankie was an antique-store find that needed its very tattered edging trimmed down. The entire ensemble for Libby reflects the recycling theme."

Sue VanNattan of Bearlooms also honors the past with her clever and charming critters. Like many of the other bear artists profiled, she has been "going green" for years. "I am passionate about incorporating antique and vintage fabrics, hats, clothing, beads and toys with my teddy bear designs," she shares. "I feel a 'connection' with the women from a century ago who lovingly stitched treasured scraps of fabric together to create a crazy quilt. It's a tradition that I am pleased to commemorate in my own way."

Fabric of Our Lives

While many folks pine to visit an exotic beachfront or laze away the day at a revitalizing spa, the "green gang" is thrilled when they can schedule a jaunt to a local



Above: "Snow Queen" by Shelly Lampshire (shellylampshire.com) is bedecked with vintage jewelry and her cloak is trimmed with recycled mink. She rides in an elaborate sleigh that was purchased as a resold item. Measuring 8 inches tall, she is regal and reclaimed. **Left:** Sue VanNattan (bearlooms@frontier.net) loves to incorporate antique and vintage finds with

her original designs. She is especially proud of her recent "Heirloom" bear. "I used precious remnants of a century-old velveteen crazy quilt, and paired this medium with mohair to make a bear that looks like he's 'wearing' a special suit."

thrift shop, flea market or estate sale. The Salvation Army storefront or a well-recommended consignment shop are as exciting as a round-trip ticket to Paris or Rome. In these cluttered and deeply stocked outlets, a recycling artist's dreams can come true.

Lisa Thoms of Twin Cubs manages to find time to browse through a thrift shop at least once a week. "I've found jewelry, props and mountains of ephemera, but my favorite finds have been the vintage fabrics I've come across."

Thoms has a trick up her sleeve: She heads immediately to the raincoat rack. "I look inside the vintage raincoats and see if they still have their original linings. A majority of the time, these linings were made from mohair, wool or even alpaca for warmth. It's a terrific discovery."

Another bear artist who is overjoyed by a trek to a thrift store is Edie Barlishen of Bears by Edie. "I have reclaimed bear fabric from vintage cushions, drapes, bedspreads, coats and even a sofa! Most of my bears' paws are made from Ultrasuede taken from vintage skirts and jackets. I have found ribbons, laces and knickknacks to use as bear props. Going to a thrift shop is like going on a treasure hunt!"

When Sue Pendleton of Bluebeary Treasures went to an antique shop, she also struck "green" gold. "The vintage wool mending thread I've used for my characters' eyebrows and claws was found in an old sewing chest that I came across in an antique shop. Also, I've used alpaca yarn, raveled from a vintage sweater, to crochet my critters. It's loads of fun, and always challenging, to create a bear from vintage materials."

Jacque Pollitt of Threadbears echoes the same enthusiasm. "I usually find my accessories at flea markets, antique malls and thrift shops. I love looking for different accessories, because I know that what I unearth will add character and individuality to my bears. I hope that they all will find homes and take off with someone's heart."

Lost and Found

"I suppose I make the most of everything," Sharon Hale of Shaz Bears chuckles. "I display all my bears on old books



Above: For "Pierre La Grande, the Pirate Cat," Mary Jardin Wimberley (maryssecretgarden.com) raided her personal stockpile of quirky treasures and unique antique finds. "You will find handmade lace edging his tie and wrist cuffs. Antique braided piping and antique mother-of-pearl buttons are on his silk damask vest. His great coat was cut from an antique ceremonial robe, and sticks were made into a peg leg and a crutch." **Above right:** All of the handsome bears by Jane Woodard (heirbears.com) are made from recycled fur coats or stoles. Additionally, she tries to garb them in reclaimed clothing and surround them with vintage accessories. "At yard sales, I will find an outfit in the 18-to-24-month size—for instance, an aviator jacket or a motorcycle jacket. Sometimes I'll find old toys, books, photos, cameras, bowties and other things that fit the bear perfectly." **Right:** "Dorothy" is a 15-inch beauty created from a "previously enjoyed" mink fur coat. She wears a vintage felt hat, which has been re-blocked and resized. Rhonda Lynn Ridgeway (kozykabin.com) further adorned the bear with a vintage collar from the 1950s, which is secured with a pearl earring. Her paws were created from the coat's lining.

collected from the Brotherhood stores in Australia. I use old clothes to make the dresses and costumes, and the fillings of my bears come from the off-cuts of Dacron from a furniture factory. If that's not enough, I use steel in my bears to make them heavy. It actually comes from the tips of nails that would usually be discarded. I've made good use of them, for people love the heaviness of the bears. All of this comes from articles I've salvaged."

Ginger Brame of The Piece Parade has taken this retooling of forgotten items to a whole new ethereal level. Her "Junkyard Sprites" meld wondrous magic with raw materials. They are put together via overlooked household items, tossed-away "trash," and mechanical bits and pieces that have stopped working. They are an astounding hybrid of everyday discards and out-of-the-ordinary interpretations.

"My idea sprang from other projects using found objects and similar materials. Working with these things, I often think of how it's one less rusty object on the side of the road, or one less broken thing headed for the landfill. As an individual, I try not to be wasteful, so it's satisfying to see something repurposed into a Junkyard Sprite. They help to



make people take a closer look at the things I've used to complete them. They are just a normal extension of who I am and the small way I have found to extend my creativity and maybe help the environment," Brame reveals.

One of the most unique artists thriving in the realm of lost and found is Anouk Johanna, a native of Holland who now resides in California. In her newly adopted homeland, Johanna has made a name for herself as a scrimshawer (one who practices scrimshaw), jewelry designer and fine artist. She has a fascination with teddy bears and paints them on fossils and ivories that are discovered in Siberia and Alaska. These legally found fossilized mammoth and walrus ivories are genuine and extremely rare.

"I engrave freehand teddy bear portraits on these fossils and ivories," she says. "I paint the engraved images with inks, which I make up myself, and I lean toward scrimshaw on fossil ivories, because it retains the brightly colored look that characterizes my work." The tusks Johanna utilizes are ancient and are not removed from any living creatures today. Some of her finds are more than 10,000 years old. She stresses that these artifacts are indeed "fossils, and are ancient. They may have been used at one time as ancient utilitarian objects, too." So, 50 or 75 centuries later, they are being reclaimed and reinterpreted once more.

Conserving Words

Reclaiming, recycling and replenishing: These are the three Rs in schoolrooms across the country. As all of us learn to be more responsible citizens of this planet, it's heartwarming—not just global warming—to see how sustainable lifestyles are becoming a reality and a necessity. For bear collectors and bear artists, "going green" is the new buzzword, but artist Jessica Van Antwerp of Van Antwerp Bears has a pragmatic perspective. "Bears aren't going green," she declares, "they've always been green. Looking back, I see that my approach, and many others, right from the start, has been about recycling and using old fabrics. Never underestimate the power of something that might be considered old or worn. The flannel shirt that reminded me so much of my grandfather was the inspiration for me to begin this whole career!" Wise words to live by, indeed. 🐻