

Nostalgia in a bear suit

PERSIAN LAMB SHOWPIECE IS TRIBUTE TO MOM

By Bonnie Malleck

FOR YEARS, whenever I plowed through my cedar-lined closet to drag out winter coats and scarves, the scent of guilt pummelled me.

There it hung, my mother's much-loved Persian lamb coat, wrapped around its heavy padded hanger, mocking me. ▶

QUITE THE LADY

A Persian lamb coat belonging to writer Bonnie Malleck's mother was transformed into four stylish bears, each one an original, by Rhonda Ridgeway, an Owen Sound nurse and part-time bear-maker. The coat's lining became paw pads and her mother's costume jewelry is a finishing adornment.

Photography • Robert Wilson



►“Do something,” it demanded.

It was a truly amazing coat, long, black, luxurious, with a mink collar and mink pillbox hat to match. It was my mom's pride and joy in the 1960s, when one of my chores each fall was to pick it up from its cold-storage hibernation at Kitchener's Kosky Furs.

Mother would wear it a few times — it was a leaden weight — when the weather was very cold, but mostly it just hung in the closet until it made its trip back to Kosky's in the spring.

This practice continued for years until real fur coats became unacceptable fashion in many quarters and Mother was afraid to wear hers.

Besides, styles had changed and the dear old coat just didn't weather the changing trends well.

So it wound up, first in her closet, then, about 15 years ago, in mine. She often joked that it was my problem now, and so

it was.

After Mother passed away in 1998, my sister and I talked often about what to do with “The Coat.” We didn't want it chopped off and turned into a funky vest by some person with 20 body piercings.

We even thought of burning it, but that didn't seem right.

Then we heard about the growing popularity of creating heirloom bears from Granny's old mink, or any fur coat. The collectible bears are something the whole family can display proudly.

Perfect. The coat no one wanted to store was now in demand. Family members started to clamor for their link to the past. Now to find the right crafts person.

That's tricky. This is an exacting craft and, as we quickly learned, can be a disaster in unskilled hands.

So it was off to the 2005 Okto-Bear-Fest at Doon Heritage Crossroads in Kitchener to “audition” bear-makers.

We cruised the rooms, talking, collecting cards, looking at bears. Pricing was all over the map. Ditto the quality level.

Then we found Rhonda Ridgeway, bear-maker artiste extraordinaire.

Ridgeway, an Owen Sound emergency room nurse and mom of three, introduced us to her bears and explained her process. We were quickly sold, especially after checking out her website (www.kozyk-abin.com).

It took a year of dawdling to make the trek to Ridgeway's beautiful country home outside Durham, which contains her den of bruins, a far-reaching array of critters made from muskrat, raccoon, mink, Alaskan seal and faux fur.

Ridgeway, who's sewn all her life, started the little-hobby-that-grew in 1995, using her grandfather's fur coat which had hung in her mother's closet for many years.

“I looked at the coat and thought, ‘I'll do something with that’.” ►



ALL READY FOR TEA

These Persian lamb bears, one in a simple lace collar, others with a touch of mink, each represent about 16 hours of labour.

Photography • Robert Wilson

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► She whipped up her own pattern, and when the finished products began attracting attention, the orders started to come in.

“Later my grandmother would walk past the bears without saying anything, but I think she knew,” Ridgeway says, laughing.

Many years and more than 1,100 bears later, Ridgeway’s bruins still sell quickly and her order book shows bears shipped all over the world, including to Japan, New Zealand and Alaska. An Alberta greeting card maker is using some of the bruins on a line of cards.

Walking into Ridgeway’s “bear show-room,” with bruins clad in vests, coats, granny glasses, antique christening gowns and crazy hats, the teddy bear addict in me kicks into overdrive. I want to snatch them all up and run away with them.

But many are spoken for — at least the ones made from coats supplied by clients. The rest go to bear shows around

“I looked at the coat and thought, ‘I’ll do something with that.’”
Rhonda Ridgeway

southern Ontario.

Ridgeway will bring her travelling bear show to Kitchener’s I Love Country Craft & Collectible Show April 6 - 7 at the Kitchener Memorial Auditorium. And she plans to return to the Okto-Bear-Fest Oct. 7 at Doon Heritage Crossroads.

She recalls one show in Mississauga when clients brought in 29 coats, causing a big dilemma: what to do with a mountain of expensive fur in a tiny kiosk.

However, even if Granny’s coat is hogging closet space, it takes a leap of faith to give it up to be carved into bears.

One young woman became so emotional

when parting with her recently deceased grandmother’s coat that Ridgeway gently suggested she take it home and wait a while.

In our case, we wanted our bears to be smashingly colourful to let the old coat strut its stuff.

My niece and I chose flashy antique felt hats. My sister picked a mink collar and pillbox hat similar to the real ones. My nephew chose a simpler bear with an antique lace collar.

Each is adorned with a piece of our mom’s costume jewelry.

From start to finish, a bear averages 16 hours in the making. In surgical mask and gloves, Ridgeway cuts the pelt, vacuums each piece five times and brushes it over and over. Each one is lined with muslin.

Ridgeway uses German glass eyes and nose, and she stuffs the bears with Polyfil and glass pellets for a “weighted feel.”

The fur coat’s lining, including the owner’s initials that are stitched into it, can be used for paw pads. Even our Kosky Fur coat and hat labels are sewn onto our bears’ rumps.

Ridgeway recalls one client asking for a particular face on her bear. “I told her that I pick the best piece of fur for the face, but I never know what they’re going to look like. They’re one-of-a-kind.”

If a client supplies the fur, Ridgeway charges \$95 for a bear up to 22 inches in height (most look better at 15 inches), plus \$12 for hats and \$12 for fur stoles.

If she supplies the fur, a bear averages \$120 to \$195, depending on their size, the type of fur and embellishments.

One amazing Alaskan Seal bear sold quickly for \$250, and others are in the upper price bracket, too.

Ridgeway says her biggest problems, besides sometimes having to use pliers to pull a needle through a thick pelt, are

scheduling and finding embellishments.

Everyone wants their bear yesterday, and she spends hours on the Internet searching for tiny props, including a small saxophone for a boy bear.

With five closets stuffed with old fur coats purchased by friends at garage sales and waiting to be made into bears to sell at her shows, Ridgeway says, “I feel like Mr. Dressup and his tickle trunk.”

At a Toronto show last fall, Ridgeway was amused when an Asian woman approached her with a proposition to move her factory to China where she could mass-produce her bears for low cost.

“I told her, ‘But I am the factory.’”

There’s no hint of production-line assembly here. The bears, which arrived in time for Christmas, are beautiful.

To go with them, we’ve framed sepia-colored 1965 prints of our mom wearing The Coat.



Rhonda Ridgeway with one of her furry creations.

It was a wonderful solution. Now four family members can enjoy the coat and treasure the memory of our mom wearing it.

And we know Mother would get a great big laugh out of it all. ☺

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