

Holding on to Dreams

The Nitty Gritty Carousel Workshop can create the horse of your dreams

As a little boy, Carl Druker remembers dashing between popcorn stands, heading toward the sound of the merry-go-round. Whirling about on his painted pony with its flowing mane and jewelled saddle, he was the Lone Ranger charging across the plains or King Arthur's bravest knight. In that swirling world of bevelled glass, lights and music, he and his faithful pony were heroes for five minutes, or forever.

But now that he's grown up, Druker still finds magic in wooden ponies. As co-owner of the Nitty Gritty Carousel Workshop, the Toronto woodcarver has spent the last seven years restoring wooden carousel horses and carving new ones for a growing clientele.

His renewed fascination started on a buying trip in Massachusetts, where he and his partner, Alan Abraham, spotted a damaged carousel horse at a flea market. They took it back to their Jarvis Street antique store and workshop and restored it. The horse soon sold and the two started looking for more.

Finding the antique horses, tigers or sea creatures that graced turn-of-the-century carousels has been an odyssey. Carousels were popular until the 1920s, but by the end of the Second World War, the public had turned to other amusements. Hundreds of carousels were dismantled, demolished, or lost to fire, neglect and vandalism.

"You wouldn't believe how many people have told me, 'oh, yeah, we used to have a carousel horse in the house, but we used it for firewood,'" says an exasperated Carl.

The carousel animals that remain have become treasured pieces of Americana. Snapped up by hundreds of collectors, they are finding new homes in parks, museums and homes in the United States. Though carousel horses were never carved in Canada, there are many collectors here, especially in Ontario. Names of master carvers such as Dentzel and Loeff roll off collectors'



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Steven Evans

tongues. But the prices for their animals are prohibitive. At a recent auction in San Francisco, a Muller horse went for \$60,000.

With antique horses hard to find and so expensive, Druker and Abraham decided there had to be a market for replicas of the old horses, as well as new designs. "We thought, why not revive

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the art of making carousel horses? We wanted to use the techniques of the old masters and create the next generation of carousel animals," says Druker.

They had an excellent mentor. Abraham's American cousin, Ruby Newman, is well known for her restorations of carousel animals, particularly her work on the San Francisco Golden Gate Carousel. She gave them some advice and the business was born.

At the Jarvis Street workshop, wood shavings and sawdust cover the floor

and the air is redolent with carpenter's glue. One employee carves a hoof and a fancy bridle for a replica of a Loeff horse. A unicorn and a "flirting cat" (a large cat with a fish in its mouth), stand in the corner awaiting a coat of paint. Meanwhile, Druker and Abraham, who now spend most days dealing with clients, speak to a couple seeking a replica of a Dentzel horse for their living-room.

But why this passion for painted ponies? Druker thinks he knows the answer. "For many people, carousel horses recapture pleasant memories of childhood. The horses represent an age of innocence and a time when we believed our dreams would come true," he says. The most common thing he hears from collectors is "I've wanted a carousel horse since I was a kid."

Collector Linda Langdon, an Ottawa nurse, used to love the horses on the carousel at Centre Island, Toronto. "Other kids liked the white-knuckle terror of the ferris wheel and roller coaster, but I could only see the horses. I was determined to buy one as soon as I could afford it." When the time came, she bought two original horses made by the carvers Dare and Dentzel.

The animals certainly aren't cheap. You can expect to pay over \$3,000 for

one of Nitty Gritty's replicas. Depending upon a customer's whim, they will copy a traditional horse — from a wild-eyed, snorting stallion that was Parker's trademark to a gentle, dreamy-eyed horse that was the Herschell-Spillman signature.

Druker says Herschell-Spillman and Dare horses are particularly popular with Canadians. "They seem to like the gentle looking animals best of all — perhaps it's a reflection of our psyche," he says.

But for the Nitty Gritty carvers (there are three on staff), the greatest delight is to have the opportunity to design one's own horse. "We want to continue to evolve and make new designs so that in 100 years or so, people will be collecting our carvers' work," says Druker.

Horses are carved from laminated basswood or pine because the wood is soft and easy to carve. Each animal takes about 150 hours to make. Some carvers study *National Geographic* magazine to get manes or zebra stripes just right. And each carver works out his own intricate details for saddles and harnesses.

Once the body, head and legs are cut, the pieces are bound together with carpenter's glue. The most elaborate carving is always on the side that would have faced the outside of a carousel and is called the "romance side". Then, the animal is carefully sanded and painted. For the most part, carvers use milk paint, a special organic and mineral milk-based mixture from a 19th century recipe. It's great virtue is that it never chips. Special enamels, which leave a glossy, china-like effect are sometimes applied, and gold or silver leaf may be added to the saddle trappings. Tails are made from real horsehair or carved from wood.

Some collectors like their horses unpainted. These animals are treated with hand-rubbed oil and wax finishes which let the grain of the wood shine through. Finally, the animal is mounted on a decorative brass pole.

Druker says people like to give their horses a "good home" and customer Edna Scott agrees. The North Bay painter, who enjoys capturing the beauty of carousel horses on canvas, recalls meeting a woman who had to sell one of her horses. "It was funny, but it was almost like she was interviewing me to see if I would give the horse a good home. But if I were in her shoes, I would have done the same thing." ♦