

Dogs

Chesterfield artist sculpts dachshunds

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waiting to be rubbed," Wainscott says. "Of course, if you've had a dachshund, I guess you'd be a little more attached."

A copy of "A Good Life" can also be viewed at the American Kennel Club Museum of the Dog in Queeny Park, which displays more than 500 pieces of artwork depicting breeds of dogs throughout the ages.

Barbara Jetta McNabb, executive director of the dog museum, says the position of the dachshund — lying on her back mid-wriggle — is unique and clever.

"Most people do more of a formal portrait with a standing dog or a seated dog facing forward, but she just had fun with it," says Jetta McNabb. "She prefers the light-hearted, whimsical approach."

Of the 250 animal artists listed with the dog museum, Jetta McNabb knows of several who focus on terriers or toy breeds. But she's unaware of any who focus solely on dachshunds as Beckner does.

"In Joy's case, she's lived with these dogs, she knows them well and that's where her heart is," says Jetta McNabb. "With something as specialized as animal art, you've got to love the breed in order to carry it off; you've got to feel a passion for it to make it work."

A sculptor emerges

Beckner's passion for art far outdates her passion for dachshunds. She had rheumatic fever as a young girl and remembers spending much of her recuperative time drawing.

She still talks with admiration about her art teacher, Bill Newman at Normandy High School.

She studied at Washington University School of Fine Arts for two years, but quit because she wasn't interested in non-art classes. She then worked for several years as a display artist and fashion coordinator for Famous-Barr and started modeling off and on. She also got married and eventually divorced. She never had children.

Fashion was fun, but Beckner always yearned to practice fine art. Her parents had already paid for one go at art school, though, and she couldn't bear to ask them to finance a second time around. So she dabbled in art while working in fund-raising, selling biodegradable sponges, soaps and oil lamps. Proceeds went toward school bands and the like.

In 1984, Beckner's then boyfriend, Brian Beckner, bought a dachshund, named her Anna von Pumpnickel Gesundheit and told Joy, "If you get along with this little dog, we will get married."

The first time she met Anna, the dog piddled on Joy's parquet floors. Joy was not happy. But over time,

she grew to love the ground-skimming canine.

About 14 years ago, Beckner took a painting class where the oil paints kept getting thicker and thicker, until she was practically sculpting with them. On a lark, she took a sculpture class at Laumeier Sculpture Park and realized immediately it was what she was meant to do.

"It was an epiphany," says Beckner. "That's the first time I've ever used that word, but I think that's what it was."

So she enrolled in art classes first at St. Louis Community College at Meramec and then Fontbonne University, and inside of two years had completed five years worth of sculpting courses.

She models, too

Sometimes Beckner strays from sculpting dachshunds. She once created a three-headed bust depicting her neighbor's golden retriever Guinevere at three stages of puppyhood.

"I had never wanted to sculpt a fluffy dog," says Beckner, "but Guinevere was absolutely adorable. She won my heart with her eyelashes — they wouldn't stop."

She also does commission work and currently has a woman paying her to sculpt a portrait head of her boyfriend. The unfinished piece sits in her sunny basement studio with head shots hanging nearby for Beckner to reference as she works.

Two of her first pieces were a full-size female nude of a model named Natasha that she did while studying at Meramec and a tiny bust of Scott Joplin that she created at Fontbonne.

And then there are the 14 bas-relief sculptures of famous cosmetologists that she created for the National Cosmetology Association Hall of Fame. Coincidentally, they overlap with Beckner's other career — modeling.

Beckner had modeled on and off for years when she was younger, but never made enough money to survive. About nine years ago, she ran into a fellow model who told her that older women were in demand at local modeling agencies. So, Beckner signed on with the now-defunct Prima Models. She still models for any agency that finds work for her, and has appeared in advertisements for Dillard's and Nextel.

But Beckner's true passion is sculpting dachshunds. Over the past decade, she's created seven life-size bronze dachshunds, 16 miniatures and has shaped a hedge in her back yard to look like the elongated hound. She's also created and sells dachshund jewelry, a door knocker called "Knock Knock" and a paper weight called "Palm Paw."

When told that the paperweight is creepy and looks as though it's crawled straight out of W.W. Jacob's fable "The Monkey Paw," Beckner studies it and says such a thought never occurred to her. In fact, she says, she's been told it's a source of serenity to many people and, on her Web site, she instructs owners of the small bronze piece to "Take comfort in your Palm Paw.



KAREN ELSHOUT / POST-DISPATCH

Joy Beckner holds Lizzie, the 14-year-old dachshund that has posed for many of Beckner's sculptures.

May it give you peace."

For each full-size sculpture, Beckner usually makes two artist's proofs and up to 20 limited editions. She makes a lot more limited editions of the miniatures. Because of the rising cost of materials — especially bronze — Beckner is reluctant to quote prices for full-scale pieces. But prices start at \$400 for a miniature, which is usually mounted on a wooden base and can fit into the palm of a hand.

An "anatomy mentor"

Beckner is so intent on making her sculptures as realistic as possible that when she is almost finished sculpting the oil clay and is ready to begin making molds, she calls her "anatomy mentor," Weldon Long, to come inspect the piece and make suggestions.

Long, a retired high school English teacher and dog show judge from Arnold, will examine the clay and then say things like, "Well, you've got a good line here, but this foot looks a little off here."

"And we've always had an agreement that, if she wants to, she can take my advice and, if she doesn't want to, she doesn't have to," says Long. "We just love to work together. We're very copacetic, I guess you could say."

Long and Beckner met in 1996 when she was sculpting "Dreaming

of Tomatoes" using Anna as a model. She needed help, so she called Anna's breeder, who referred her to Long, a local dog show judge.

The two became fast friends. Long, who judged all types of hounds for 25 years around the country and once inspected 145 dogs in a six-hour period, remembers with great amusement the first time he was called to Beckner's studio.

"She had this old red bitch that was modeling for her, and she had her trained to get up on this little platform under bright lights and pose like she was sleeping. I'd never seen anything like it," says Long.

Unlike Anna, Edgar and Lizzie won't pose for Beckner, so she works from memory, photos and by examining and groping their body parts no matter what position they're in. She can also envision parts of their anatomy by looking at her own.

"We are all variations on them," says Beckner, who came to this conclusion when she spotted another woman's foot and ankle during yoga class.

"I thought to myself, 'That's what is going on with Edgar's feet,'" she says.

Beckner was, of course, in the downward dog position at the time.

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