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Art Appreciation

### **PART ONE**

*“The way to read a fairy tale is to throw yourself in.” – W.H. Auden*

Once upon a time in a small village far, far away lived an enchantress. Each day she set to work at her craft surrounded by her silent guardians, but not just any guardians at that... No, no dear reader these breathed fire, puffed smoke, and created curious mischief at every turn. She was surrounded by tens, hundreds, thousands such guardians... her dragons of every shape and size. It can even be said that the once upon a time and that far, far away village are closer than you might think, and that fairy tales have a way of coming true.

In a town near to my home, in her basement workshop, “the enchantress” works diligently away at her craft, her ceramics that is. The enchantress that was more than willing to work with young 4-Hers that did not have a clue about ceramics. The enchantress who was more than willing to take some time out of her busiest time of the year to talk to a young woman to whom once upon a time she taught to craft mysterious, magical creatures from clay. The enchantress who is none other than Melissa Hogenson, art teacher turned clay businesswoman extraordinaire.

Melissa and her love of art goes all the way back to her high school years. She told me that originally she never considered art as part of her future, but when her art teacher brought in a small wheel to throw clay on, Melissa was hooked. She attended Northeast Missouri State Teacher’s College (Truman State) in Kirksville, MO to receive her degree in Art Education. At the time she specialized in painting and ceramics, but when she attended her first Kansas City

Art Fair she noticed that the ceramicists would actually sell their works while the painters just sat there. This revelation, coupled with a less than spectacular art teacher's salary and the first baby on the way, led her to tell her husband that she was going to try her hand at ceramics, although at the time she had no idea what to make. That particular inspiration did not come until later. It was not until Melissa attended a local Renaissance Festival that her inspiration struck and ideas began to form. She returned the next year with wizards, other magical creatures, and the all-important dragons. After all her dragons proceeded to sell and requests for more came in a future in dragons was decided, and she set about her task with both enjoyment and skill.

After working clay for thirty plus years now to form dragons of all shapes and sizes, Melissa's methods and processes are pretty much set in stone. She told me that her ideas come to her as she experiments while changing her previous dragons. She can be sculpting a dragon she has created hundreds of time before and suddenly realize that it needs to be changed and then she just goes for it. Melissa told me that when it comes to sketchbooks and jotting down ideas, she feels much more comfortable just experimenting with her clay. The only works that she does sketch are her castle lamps, and the sketches allow her to figure out how much clay she is going to need for each lamp. Bringing her ideas to life immediately like this keeps her from having a buildup of ideas waiting to be put in material form. She also finds that in her line of work she has yet to ever hit a dry spell because her customers are always coming up with new requests and ideas they believe she should try.

It just so happened that my interview fell during Melissa's busiest time of the year, right in the middle of the Kansas City Renaissance Festival. She told me that she really does not take a break from her work because now that they have built up a web based clientele, she makes dragons year round. Melissa and her husband do try to slow down following their string of

Renaissance Festivals, sometime between Thanksgiving and Christmas. This small “break” allows them to spend time with their family and get away from the work lurking in the basement.

When I arrived Melissa was in the process of making a new batch of “Trouble’s to take back to Kansas City the next weekend. She had a table full of what looked like vases that were actually wheel thrown dragon bodies ready for further assembly. With each of her many dragons she adds some element of smoke or fire and this particular dragon happened to be an incense burner. As we chatted and worked our way through the interview, Melissa steadily assembled all the pieces of “Trouble” into one mischievous looking creature. I was fascinated by the ease of her movements, but realized that after making close to 5,000 dragons a year, she can most likely make dragons in her sleep. Yet another thing that drew my attention was her lack of ceramic tools. She had a variety of tools surrounding her but the ones she used were a scrapper, a drink straw, and a knife. She of course also used her most important tools... her hands. With them she shaped the wings, feet, claws, and expressive face. After cutting a hole in the back and attaching all the extra pieces, “Trouble” was ready to dry and then head for the kiln. When I asked her what her goal for all these works was she answered, “I just want to give each customer a little bit of mythical whimsy to enhance their homes.” After seeing row after row of mythical creatures seemingly ready to march right into the kiln, it was easy to see what she was talking about.

Just as we were nearing the end of our interview, I asked Melissa what influences her daily in her artwork. She laughed and proceeded to lean down, pick up, and then set a cat in my lap. As I sat petting Patches, Melissa explained that her dragons drew most of their curiosity and expressions from her very own pets. Her cats are always around the workshop as she is creating, forever adding their own influences to each new dragon. Another more personal influence Melissa shared with me was how she based her male, female, and baby dragons on her own

family. The male dragons tend to be more serious and protective looking, like her husband. The female dragons are always seen with two baby dragons that represent Melissa's own two daughters. The females also tend to have more of a nurturing, caring expression about their faces. All in all, Melissa draws much more influence from her daily surrounding than I ever would have expected.

In the end getting to see the “enchantress” at work with her craft again after all these years was a rewarding experience. The interview process allowed me a much more in depth look at the whole process and gave me insights into Melissa’s world. Now I know how she started out and how her ideas come to her, as well as how she experiments and when a break is best taken. Finally, I know what her goal is for each work and how her life influences her in so many great ways. It is with much anticipation that I am looking forward to the second part of this interview process.