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THE NOBLE VIEW
To Catch a Mockingbird

BY JOHN DARCY NOBLE

"I call them mockingbirds, because they do indeed mock humanity."

To my mind, Betty Nelson-Daniel of Toronto is an artist first and foremost, and her dolls are works of art, before they are dolls. She interests me immensely, since, as my readers must have noticed, I am always fascinated by the outer limits of experience, by what my irreverent godson Beauregard refers to as "The Wilder Shore of Dollmaking."

But irreverent or not, that is the key to "The Noble View," and while I shall always love all sorts and conditions of dolls, in this, my old age, I am most excited by new experiences—by dolls that are different.

My first impression of Nelson-Daniel's dolls is of their startling beauty, and the second impression is of vitality and movement—qualities so overwhelmingly seductive that it is some moments before I realize the profound difference between these and other dolls. For these are not human figures, they are birds. "I call them mockingbirds, because they do indeed mock humanity," says their creator. "The ones I have sent to you are mostly dancers, because these are perhaps my favorites. I love the beauty of movement, and it is a challenge to interpret it with these unexpected creatures."



But interpret it she does. These little dancing birds are positively singing with ecstasy, the celebration of their dance underlined by the splendor of their befeathered costumes. Now this is something very rare in dollmaking, and I cannot remember such pure joy in the interpretation of movement since the German dollmakers of the early 1920s.

In that turbulent era, French fashion designer Paul Poiret had changed forever the way that women thought about their bodies, while American dancer Isadora Duncan, and then, the Ballet Russe had shown to an astonished world, undreamed of ramifications of the dance. There was a German renaissance in dollmaking at that vividly creative time, a flowering of "art dolls" such as had never been seen before.

Among those German doll artists there was one, a woman called Lotte Pritzel, whose delight it was to capture the beauty of movement. In Lotte's case, her dolls were pared down to mere handfuls of wire, plaster and paper, so fragile that a sharp jolt—or even a sudden breeze—could destroy them. In Germany today, the dolls of Lotte Pritzel command very high prices indeed, and this is not surprising.

Betty Nelson-Daniel comes from an artistic family, and she received early encouragement from both her mother and grandmother. As can be readily imagined, she does explore many

kinds of aesthetic expression. But her mockingbirds are, understandably, extremely popular, and Betty is kept busy supplying the demand. Besides her favorite dancers, she enjoys fashioning more static birds, which she loves to dress up in costumes which, serious enough in themselves, become absurd and delightful in the mockingbird context. The two solemn American Indian birds, wearing what are in fact beautifully detailed, authentic costumes, are an apt example.

There are of course other dollmakers who have delighted in expressing movement. Doll artist Anna Avigail Brahm—one of the pioneers in our time, once made for me a pair of Water Demons so vigorous that I expect them to dance off my wall at any moment, while my dear friend Carol Nordell actually made a complete alphabet of the ballet, 52 dolls in all, A for Albrecht (the hero of *Giselle*), B for Baryshnikov, and so on. She made them for a National Institute of American Doll Artists convention, and I was provident enough to photograph the entire series, for the moment the salesroom opened, there was a rush to Carol's stall, and within minutes that wonderful alphabet was decimated, and soon existed as an entity only in my album.

But no one else has ever made mockingbirds, and I, for one, am grateful to Betty Nelson-Daniel for the experience of them. They are saucy, absurd, slightly sinister with



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their withdrawn, mysterious faces—and they are, above all, overwhelmingly beautiful.

The author is the curator emeritus of the Toy Collection at the Museum of the City of New York. His column, "The Noble View," is a regular CDM feature.

Betty Nelson-Daniel
233 1/2 McIntosh St.
Scarborough, Toronto
M1N 3Z2, Canada
416-261-4173

