



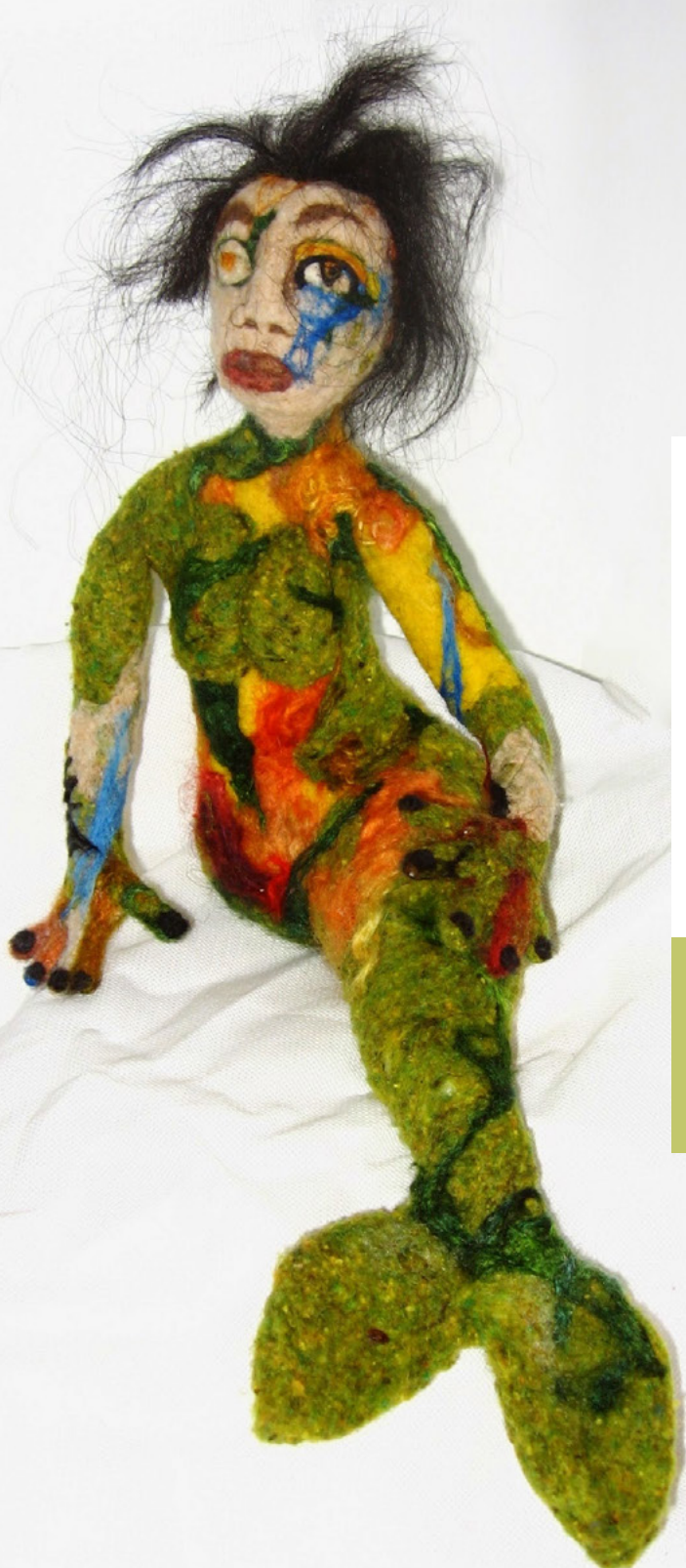
Heritage NL

***Exploring Folklore
Through Craft***
with **Janet Peter**

Living Heritage Economy
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Exploring Folklore Through Craft with Janet Peter



Visual artist, maker, and arts educator Janet Peter has been making marks on paper since she was old enough to hold a pencil. After high school, Janet briefly studied animation, but it was after graduating with a Visual Arts diploma that she began a line of papier-mâché mummer figurines. She possesses a great interest in local traditions and lore, and these themes recur in much of her work.

Janet Peter is one of those people who has been making things since she was a kid. She formalized that love of creativity in the 1990s when she went to the College of the North Atlantic in Stephenville and earned a diploma in visual arts. After graduating, she moved back to St. John's. As she thought about how best to apply her training, a friend suggested that she make mummies, the disguised house-visitors of local Christmas customs. At that point, there were only a few people making mummies for the craft market, a situation which has changed drastically since the late '90s.

Back in 1998, I began making papier-mâché mummies, and that is the foundation of what I currently do today. Papier-mâché mummies are still the bulk of what I create and the bulk of what I sell, but as a result of gaining access to different markets, and gaining more recognition as an artist-maker, I've been able to expand into other areas. My business also includes needle felting and mixed media sculpture, and I explore other cultural motifs besides mummies like

fairies and hags. I'm currently exploring different cultural motifs outside of Newfoundland and Labrador for an upcoming exhibition.

Like everyone else, I learned papier-mâché in school. I thought it was pretty fun; you got a sculptural effect with something that is so simple and accessible, recyclable. That really appealed to me. In terms of using it for my business, it just made sense as being something that was durable. If you drop it, it is not going to crack or break, or shatter, or hurt anybody. It just had a real functionality to it that appealed to me in terms of longevity and user-friendliness.

Her work has shifted over time, reflecting an evolving process and product. Over the years, Janet has honed techniques and experimented with materials. She has expanded into needle felting work utilizing locally-produced wools, largely sourced from Foggy Rock Fibres, a small company out of Cupids specialising in handcrafted yarns. The Craft Council of NL was a major part of Janet's evolution as an artist and entrepreneur,

giving her advice, direction, and access to markets through their juried gallery process.

You submit your products, and people who work in the field or have familiarity with the technique will critique your work. They want to see originality, they want to see that you haven't taken anyone else's idea, that you're not using a kit, if you are using traditional processes. If you are, there are certain standards that you have to follow. It is a whole critique process, and they will send it back and say, "Fix this, change that" or "We don't like the way you presented it, it's not packaged right." They want the product to look a certain way. For a while I was making flat pieces and I didn't paint the back, so they said, "It would be better if you painted the back. Have you thought about what you are using to hang the piece? Is this the best hardware? Is this durable?" For a while I was making my own paper pulp, I was baking them in the oven, and it was just not working. I had to go back to the drawing board numerous times. They gave me feedback on the quality of the product.

The market for Janet's work is largely made up of people familiar with fine craft who seek out higher-end products. It tends to be people in a higher income bracket: craft fair attendees, professional women, the university-educated crowd. But while that type of customer forms her customer

base, Janet is not afraid to delve into the darker aspects of Newfoundland and Labrador folklore and legend. It is her exploration of folk motifs and supernatural belief that makes her work stand out in the local craft scene.

I'm starting now to get younger people who are interested in tradition, and interested in lore, the Dungeons and Dragons crowd and their interest in things mystical, paranormal, and creepy. The thing that got the mummies started were stories from people who had experienced the tradition as children. Their perspective of having these hooded masked people coming into the house — who were loud, drinking, falling over, causing chaos — was terrifying for many of them. That was my inspiration. It wasn't "We had a grand kitchen party, and everybody danced, and they went home," it was the terror aspect. That has been the seam running through most of the work I create. I always had an interest in the paranormal and the creepy, and darker things: things like fairies and fairy lore, being dark, luring people away, the idea of the changeling. Obviously there is an appeal there for that whole idea of trying to kick away the darkness that creeps into our lives. It is something that has always interested me; I think it has always been there. Even when I was a kid, people were into that sort of thing. It allows me to tap into a generation before, because it is a consistent thing that doesn't seem to be going away.



Who is the **Old Hag?**

"The Old Hag is cross-cultural, but Newfoundland culture named it. It is when you are asleep but then your brain wakes up, but your body doesn't. You feel like you are paralyzed. People have visions of a woman sitting on your chest. They've named her The Old Hag. I can't remember who asked me to make one, but I thought it was such a neat thing. Originally it was papier-mâché, but when I got into needle felting, it made more sense. You could do a more ethereal piece with lots of wispy wool; she has this more ghostlike appearance. Whenever people see stuff like that, they are like 'Oh my God, the Old Hag!' because they are not expecting to see someone create a product out of this cultural motif. When you go to Walmart, they don't have the Old Hag section, right!? That is what people love, the surprise of it, the 'I didn't see that coming, I didn't even know that could be a thing!' No one has ever said, 'That doesn't look like the Old Hag.' It resonates."

Research is an important part of Janet's work, both about what will sell from a marketing perspective, and about the folkloric source material for her work.

I do a lot of research. Now it is so much easier with Google, but when I first started out, I interviewed people who experienced mummering. They told me their stories about mummering, they described what mummerners would wear. That was a huge help, and I made a lot of prototypes and test-marketed. Similarly, now, I test market with my friends and I trust them to be honest. Before anything goes out the door, I research everything first, I don't just dive in. Through the research I get an idea, I get the vision. I don't like to use other people's interpretations other than to get an idea if I don't understand the description around a piece of clothing.

As an independent artist, Janet has faced challenges familiar to other new craft entrepreneurs: lack of knowledge around product pricing and marketing strategies, a lack of public awareness of production costs, and knowing

how best to balance the need for artistic expression and personal development with the need to produce consistent market-ready goods. After spending several years working full time at her craft practice, she now works part time as an arts educator at The Rooms in St. John's and as an associate with Coastline Consultants, which allows her to both supplement her income and escape of the isolation of her studio.

Interest in Janet's at-times creepy creations remains high, and she notes that she is starting to see a little bit of a pushback amongst buyers against cheaply-made foreign imports. Twenty years into her practice, she sees more handmade goods available, and that competition in turn inspires her to try new and different things.

I measure success by demand, which continues. I also measure it by people coming to me and telling me their stories about mummering, approaching me at craft fairs. I love personal stories, which get included in my pieces. I love when they say they got a piece and what it meant to them, that something you did touched them on an emotional level. That to me is worth it.

Her advice for young makers and artists? *Research what you are getting into. Talk to other makers. Talk to industry leaders. The Craft Council of NL is a great launching place to start. Don't quit your day job if you have one. This is something you could ease yourself into, instead of going all-in.*

Janet on Social Media

"I don't sell anything online. The odd time someone will contact me on Facebook, but at the same time I've not worked to develop a website. I would love to do it, but it absolutely comes down to time. Twitter is for research. That is where I found #FolkloreThursday, which was invaluable for everything around my practice. There is so much information there, and people from all over the place with their traditions and ideas. Instagram is where I experiment with digital collage, and occasionally I'll post pieces I'm working on. Facebook is the money shot: if you want to sell something, or get people out to a show, that is where you go."

How to find Janet



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Designs by Janet



Prepared by Dale Jarvis, Intangible Cultural Heritage Development Officer for Heritage NL, as part of a series of case studies examining the links between living heritage, traditionality, entrepreneurship, and community economic development in Newfoundland and Labrador. **For more information, email dale@heritagenl.ca or phone 1-888-739-1892.**

Living Heritage Economy Case Study 001. All photos courtesy Janet Peter.