

The Susan Quinlan Doll and Teddy Bear Museum

By Diane Troutman



Museum entrance.

Have you ever thought your doll collection is so large that you should open a museum. That is exactly what Susan Quinlan did in Santa Barbara, California. I first learned about the Susan Quinlan Doll and Teddy Bear Museum after receiving an email announcing their first event "A Teddy Bear Artist Open House" that took place in January 2009. After visiting the museum's website I quickly realized highlighting Susan's museum would be perfect for the Summer issue of *Expressions* with the theme "Dolls We Collect".

I took the opportunity to interview Susan, I hope you will enjoy learning from her in her own words how she created this wonderful museum and take the opportunity to visit the more than 3,000 dolls and bears that Susan has on display in her unique museum!

Q: Are you a native of Santa Barbara?

A: I was born in Cleveland, Ohio. My father was appointed to the faculty of UC Santa Barbara and we moved out to California in 1951. I grew up in Santa Barbara and loved it dearly. When I married I wanted to move back, but ended up living in San Francisco for about 30 years instead. When we (my husband Terry and I) decided to open a museum, we first looked in the Bay Area, but didn't find any buildings that we liked that had access to adequate parking. So we tried looking in Santa Barbara and were lucky enough to find a building that we liked.

Q: When did the museum open?

A: The museum opened in December 2005.

Q: What inspired you to open the museum?

A: The more I collected, the more I was amazed by the creativity and talent of the various doll and teddy bear artists. They can take such simple materials and put them together to create absolutely fantastic pieces. I wanted very much to share their work with other people so that they could also enjoy it.

Q: How long did you spend "planning the museum" before it actually became a reality?

A: I think we began to look for a building in the mid 1990's. It took us several years to find the location, and then another two years to have the building renovated. After that it took six years to put the displays together.

Q: Was it difficult to find a location for the museum?

A: Yes, as I mentioned we thought it was important to have reasonably priced nearby parking, which is almost non-existent in San Francisco. We also wanted to find a building with some character to it such as Mediterranean architecture. The fact that our entire building is one story means that it is completely handicapped accessible which was another one of our considerations

Q: How large is the museum?

A: The building is 10,000 square feet, which houses both the museum galleries and the book collection, which is quite large. It also contains a tea room, gift shop, library reading room, office space and some storage space.

Q: Were there special precautions that you have to take to protect the dolls and bears that are on display?

A: We had shelving designed with hanging metal rods that will sway during earthquakes to help protect the dolls. We are lucky that our weather is quite consistent in Santa Barbara, but we have both heat and air conditioning for temperature control. We had extra insulation put into the roof area which helps to keep an even interior temperature. We have a ventilation system to keep dust out of the cases. Our gallery lights are equipped with UV filters. Also the lights are off when there are no people in the galleries. We also have on-going pest control measures to protect the dolls and teddy bears. We do not allow smoking, food, or cameras in the galleries. And we have an extensive security system which monitors both the interior and the exterior of the museum.

Q: How does your museum differ from other doll and toy museums?

A: I wanted to distinguish this museum from others by emphasizing California artists and manufacturers. As I set up my Historical Gallery, I also incorporated a little bit of California history into the display of the various ethnic groups that have come to the State. I love finding dolls and teddy bears that have a connection to the state in some way. For example, Jeanette Warner donated a book to the museum on the fairy tale cottages of Carmel which were built by a gentleman named Hugh W. Comstock. His wife, Mayotta Comstock, made cloth dolls called "Otsy Totsy" dolls. The author, Joanne Methewson, used drawings of the dolls throughout the book to introduce the information about each of the houses. Jeanette had actually found one of the original dolls that was pictured, and donated it to us as well. Another example is a strange little wooden doll named "Scarey Ann" that turned out to have been created by a dentist in Atascadero and was produced in that city. A second gallery, my Literary Gallery,

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is completely devoted to dolls and bears representing characters from books – mostly children’s books but also some adult books. The purpose was to tie the world of dolls and teddy bears with literature –my two passions. My Collector’s Gallery is everything else I couldn’t resist, including a section on California teddy bear artists, a fairy forest, a fairy tale forest, space toys, puppets, and dolls displayed by type of material (cloth, wood, wax, etc.) I should say that while I try to emphasize California artists, there are many other artists represented here as well.

The cases we designed for the permanent display areas are very unusual for a doll museum. We wanted a feel of flow and continuity, so we designed the cases so that there would be no walls or partitions. The cases have continuous glass fronts, or “walls of glass”, with 80 panels that measure 8’ x 4’. The lack of obstructive walls means that displays can be expanded to the required size and still be cohesive.

I think that every museum is influenced by the background and interests of the person putting it together. My college major was history, and while I lived in San Francisco I took additional classes in California and San Francisco history. And I have always loved books, particularly children’s literature. This is why I was a librarian for over 30 years. I also spent many weekends in my early childhood in the Cleveland Museum of Art where my father taught Saturday classes, and I have maintained a lifelong love of art. To me, dolls and teddy bears are wonderful expressions of the work of creative artists, and my museum is in fact a specialized art museum.

The other area that I think sets my museum apart is the extensive book collection housed in the Library. It is the largest known collection of books on the topics of dolls, dollhouses, and teddy bears, containing over 10,000 volumes. There is also a large collection of periodicals in these subjects, as well as books on related topics such as toys, puppets, and costumes.

One of the most unique features of the museum are the very large murals painted on the walls of the Tea Room and Library Reading Room. On one side of the Tea Room is a panorama of dolls having



The “Collector’s Gallery” at the Susan Quinlan Doll & Teddy Bear Museum.



The “Literary Gallery” at the Susan Quinlan Doll & Teddy Bear Museum.

a tea party against the mountains of Santa Barbara, with the Mission and the Courthouse in the background. The other wall depicts teddy bears having a picnic on the Santa Barbara beach, with Stearn’s Wharf and the Channel Islands in the distance. As one looks up, the clouds turn into fluffy white teddy bears. The Reading Room has a mural depicting Goldilocks and the Three Bears. Goldilocks, Baby Bear and Papa Bear have fallen asleep while he has been reading to them, and Mama Bear is covering them up with a blanket.

Lastly, I have tried to make my website as interesting and useful as possible. I am trying to give doll and teddy bear artists recognition by including pictures of their work. That way people who cannot travel to the museum can still enjoy and appreciate their work. One area I think is very different is the curriculum section. Whenever I find a curriculum guide utilizing dolls or teddy bears that can be used in a classroom I add it in this category. I think it is important in this age of electronics to continue to expose children to these toys in positive and interesting ways.

Q: *What surprises most people about your museum?*

A: Many are surprised at its size, and that it has so many dolls and bears. I think most people are expecting a small collection in a small storefront building, even though we advertise that there are over 3,000 dolls and bears on display. We receive many compliments on the way the displays are arranged and on the overall appearance of the building’s interior as well as the exterior.

Q: *How many dolls are in the museum’s collection?*

A: I must admit that I haven’t counted the entire collection. There are at least 3,000 dolls and bears on display now (about 2,500 dolls and 500 teddies), but I keep adding new ones every month. The rest of the collection is stored in a 2,000 square foot building and will eventually be used to create changing displays.

Q: *How many bears are in the museum’s collection?*

A: Somewhere between 800 and 1000.

Q: *How much does the museum’s collection grow each year?*

A: I would guess at least 300 dolls and bears are added each year. Also about 200 books are added to the Library each year.

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Q: How is the museum arranged?

A: There are three galleries. The Historical Gallery emphasizes California. One side has displays of the various ethnic groups that have come to California to create our cultural heritage today. The other side has California doll manufacturers, California doll artists, and Santa Barbara connections to the doll world. The Literary Gallery contains dolls and bears that represent characters from children's and adult books. The Collector's Gallery contains everything else. There is a section on Teddy Roosevelt, California teddy bear artists, other teddy bears displayed by the seasons, a small collection of puppets, a fairy forest, a fairy tale forest, space toys, and dolls by type (cloth, wooden, wax, etc).

Q: Do you have different exhibits throughout the year?

A: Not yet. We plan to add 38 stand-alone cases that will be used for that purpose.

Q: How does the museum acquire dolls and bears? Do you purchase them or are they donated?

A: Most of the new items are purchased. For the most part I prefer to attend doll and teddy bear shows so that I can see the actual doll or bear before buying it. This is particularly true of artist dolls and bears. I do purchase some items on the Internet, but they are usually commercial dolls. On the other hand the Internet has become a wonderful place to find books to purchase for the Library. We have had some wonderful donations, which we very much appreciate especially since we are not a non-profit institution and cannot provide tax write-offs, but we can provide more care, love and appreciation than museums that do not feature dolls and teddy bears.

Q: Do you have a favorite doll in the museum?

A: That is a really tough question. Artist dolls are my favorite, but it would be impossible to choose a single doll due to the wealth of talent among the doll artist community. I would say that "Elisabeth and Marie-Charlotte" by Hildegard Gunzel is perhaps the most influential doll in the collection as it represents so many things that I think are important. It was inspired by the poem of the "The Reading Mother" by G. Strickland, which reinforces the idea of the importance of parents



"Elisabeth and Marie-Charlotte" by Hildegard Gunzel

reading to their children as well as the value of books and literature. On a personal level, I had a mother who read to me and it is one of the most important memories of my own childhood. And finally it is both a beautiful and imposing piece, and one that we have chosen to be the museum's image piece as it represents the combination of dolls, bears and books which our museum supports.



Susan Quinlan.

Q: What is your personal collection of dolls and bears like?

A: My collection is mostly on display, and I think it is quite eclectic. I have a mixture of commercial and artist dolls and bears, but again my preference is for the artists' works.

Q: Do you continue to have a personal collection of dolls and bears in your home?

A: No. I want as many as possible to be available for other people to see and appreciate. Eventually I may bring home pieces that don't fit into the current exhibits so that my friends and family can enjoy them until they are needed.

Q: Do you have a staff of employees at the museum?

A: No. Right now I run the whole operation. My husband helps with administrative, promotional and maintenance tasks.

Q: Is there a fee to view the museum?

A: The admission fee is \$6.50 for adults and \$3.50 for preteens. There are also group rates of \$5.00 and \$2.50.

Q: What type of books are in the library?

A: Over 10,000 fiction and non-fiction books about dolls, teddy bears and dollhouses/miniatures. There are antique, out-of-print, and new books. I also have a collection of periodicals in these subjects as well as patterns. In addition I have small selective collections on toys, puppets, and costumes.

Q: What type of items are sold in the gift shop?

A: A mixture of one-of-a-kind and commercial dolls and bears. I do not have much in the way of dollhouse miniatures. I have many books for sale, both fiction and non-fiction.

Q: What has been the biggest challenge in operating the museum?

A: Getting the word out to all interested parties that the museum exists.

Learn more about the Susan Quinlan Doll and Teddy Bear Museum and Library by visiting their website www.quinlanmuseum.com or by visiting the museum in person at 122 West Canon Perdido Street, Santa Barbara, California.