

# Kirsten enjoys making lovable Little Rascals

If crafting, creativity and teddy bears are part of your make up, then even a long break from it will not stop you returning to something you love

BY JILL MUNDY

**K**irsten Koester lives on the outskirts of a small village in the far north of Germany. She is perhaps better known by her trade name Die Kleinen Strolche (Little Rascals). "The name is borrowed from a 1960's TV series with 1930's silent movies that I loved growing up. This series was about the adventures and pranks of a gang of snotty but lovable louts."

Kirsten sewed her first bear in 1994. "Several hundred bears were made over the years, until I stopped making bears about 15 years ago. On the one hand, this had to do with the fact that the interest in collector bears was clearly decreasing and, on the other hand, I noticed that my heart was no longer in the matter. However, I didn't give away my tools and materials, I kept them for all these years. Now, after a long time, I've picked up the tools of the trade again and I've noticed I haven't forgotten it - making bears could be fun again!"

A part-time bear maker, Kirsten also enjoys other creative pursuits, such as dying fibers and fabrics with vegetable dyes, or spinning with a spinning wheel. "In my large garden, where I grow vegetables and dye plants, there is always something to do. And the North Sea is not far away; it invites you to go swimming in the sea and stand-up paddling in summer, and to walk along the dike in winter."

Kirsten feels fortunate to have her

own space within the family home where she can be creative but bear making is a little more flexible. "Since I prefer to sew my bears by hand, I can actually sew them anywhere. I always do all the other work, such as darning, splitting joints, pulling in eyes, sewing on ears and embroidering noses, at my work table, where all the tools I need are ready."

A love of a variety of crafts has been with Kirsten for many years. "Working with all kinds of textile material has always appealed to me: I have acquired many techniques from spinning, weaving, knitting, crocheting, knotting and from lace making to silk painting. I've also always had a weakness for teddy bears: the two companions from my childhood are now sitting in my bedroom." Taking a career break after the birth of her second daughter gave Kirsten an opportunity to combine both passions. "The impetus was a gift pattern, and so the first bear was created at the end of 1994. Two years of trying it out followed. I worked from clippings from magazines, tapped into new sources of material, and slowly worked my way into the craft of making bears. In the meantime I came to make my bears according to my own ideas, and patterns I have developed."

And during this time, several different styles of bear have developed too. "My bears cannot be assigned to a clear category: I have made bears in sizes 10-50cm, crazy bears (my Crazy



Bear series), a series of little classic style bears (Little Classic), for a while there were natural bears (polar and brown bears), then again a mini bear series with bears in different poses. There were mice, there were bears lying down, I also made tableaux ... I won't let myself be pinned down."

The bears Kirsten creates are a far cry from her first attempt but it is all part of the learning process. "The very first bear I sewed, in 1994 after someone else had cut it, was more of a cuddly bear - made of cotton terry cloth and stuffed very softly. After making a series of bears from someone else's instructions, I started designing my own patterns. In doing so, I broke away from the pattern that a bear can either sit or stand. I was excited to create bears in different positions: some are lying on their stomachs with their heads in their hands, others are lying on their backs with their legs in the air, still others are with their hands on their hips. The most exciting thing is always the head, because this is where you can determine the bear's expression. Should the eyes be close together or further apart? Should the

ears sit higher on the head or more to the side? And the embroidering of the nose and mouth decides whether the bear looks happy or sad."

It is not only different styles that have developed over time; Kirsten enjoys exploring new techniques too. "My bears are jointed 5-7 times and the joints are split. Sometimes I give my bears a conical neck joint to increase their possibilities of expression. I prefer to make one-off pieces, but there are also limited small series or an open series."

One technique she mastered is a feature of a bear she still holds close to her heart. "My favorite bear I have made is Cedric. With this bear, in 1999, I presented the sculpted feet with four toes, which are now typical for many of my bears, for the first time."

Paying attention to details is often where Kirsten finds inspiration. "Since I always go through the world with open eyes, I never run out of ideas. Sometimes I'm inspired by a movement someone is making, sometimes by a poster I see somewhere in passing, sometimes it's a special fabric (see the photo of Marsupilamis),



MEET THE ARTIST



Quality is also very important. "I prefer to work with high-quality material, mohair, viscose, hand-blown glass eyes. From time to time I dye the fabrics I work with using vegetable dyes. The bears are stuffed with washed and combed sheep's wool. Sometimes I also use granules, especially on the standing bears."

Most of the bears that have successfully participated in competitions (British Bear Artist Award, Golden George, Tokyo International Teddy Award, Golden Teddy Award, TOBY Awards, TED worldwide, Euroteddy) have stayed with me.

Before taking a long break from bear making, Kirsten attended bear fairs both domestically and internationally. In addition, she sold the bears to many countries through her website at the time. And her website is at the forefront of her future plans. "I would like to redesign my website, which has been on hiatus for a long time, so it becomes easily accessible again for interested bear lovers."

THE BEAR FACTS:

The Little Rascals  
Collectible Teddy Bears by Kirsten Koester  
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