

# TRADITION || INNOVATION

American Masterpieces of Southern Craft & Traditional Art

## ***Minnie Adkins***

*The following is Dale Johnson's summary of an interview with the artist and her husband, Herman Peters, at their home near Isonville, Kentucky on March 23, 2007.*

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Minnie Adkins is a celebrated folk artist known worldwide for her carvings and paintings. She does her work in an untrained style that is instantly recognizable as hers. Besides carving animals such as giraffes and cows, she also makes fantasy creations like her "Fox-a-doodle" and her trademark "Blue Rooster." Before the 1980's, she made her carvings and sold them for as little as 50 cents to a dollar as curiosities.

Adrian Swain, who is now curator of the Folk Art Center in nearby Morehead, Kentucky, met and encouraged her in her work. He became her broker to collectors in

New York and elsewhere, and her fame grew as she also came to the attention of Phyllis George, who at the time was First Lady of Kentucky. Phyllis George helped start the craft-marketing arm of the Kentucky Arts Council and published some coffee table books featuring Minnie and other artists who were not formally trained. The blue rooster was inspired by musician Mike Norris' children's book of the same name (she and Mike did school presentations together for many years). Minnie's fame is now such that her pieces show up regularly on eBay and auctions selling for thousands of dollars. She is constantly expanding her artistic horizons, and besides mentoring a network of artists in her region, she makes basswood carvings which she then paints, primitive style folk art paintings in acrylic, appliquéd quilts with her fanciful animals, and collaborates on glazed pottery, woven blankets, and whatever else strikes her fancy.



***Minnie Adkins- Fox, Possum with Babies, and Rooster***

***Photo by Luis Quiles, 2007***

Minnie Adkins is an innovator and did not grow up influenced by family members, nor by a community tradition of woodcarving. She especially takes exception to many printed articles about her that say she was influenced by men carving or whittling. She gets quite indignant and emphasizes that she was not influenced by any old men whittling!

*Minnie: I've seen a lot of older people, old men, sit around and whittle, but they wadn't 'a shaping it into nothing. Just makin' shavings.*

Her only family influence seems to be that her father carved ax handles. Her earliest carvings were done when she was quite young, as presents for her parents. She then made many of her own toys, including popguns and sling shots. After she gained fame and was selling works for tidy sums of money, others from nearby communities came to her for guidance to learn to carve, and before long she was mentoring six to ten other carvers at any given time. Although some of her students have passed away, there are still several well-known folk artists she mentored who are active, and she continues to encourage new talent. Nearby, a group of these artists meet once a month welcoming newcomers. For years, she held an annual festival on her property south of Isonville, Kentucky, "A Day in the Country," that drew people from all over the world to eat, hear gospel music, and browse her and her students' work. She has now turned the festival over to the people in Morehead and they continue the tradition there, sponsored by the Folk Art Center.

Minnie's first collaborator was her husband Garland, who died of cancer. She has now been married to local man Herman Peters for close to ten years. He worked as a welder for the Pipefitters Union, and she encouraged him to start making sculptures from iron pipe. Many of her recent trademark "Blue Roosters" are iron sculptures made by Herman in her style, which she then paints and decorates. Several large ones are on outdoor display in Morehead, Kentucky, and Henderson, West Virginia. She has always lived in the same place (except for a 15-year stint in Ohio), which she and Herman call "Happy Gizzard Hollow," a bottom land that was part of her father's large 400 acre farm. She has a small shop in which she stores art, her own and others, including her son and grandsons. She and Herman share a larger garage shop for work. They have built a small one-room guest cottage for use by family or people that make the pilgrimage to her door from places like Europe and Nova Scotia. She is well aware of marketing and sales strategies, and watches eBay to see which of her earlier work comes up for auction, which it does quite often. She continues to sell her work from home, but it sells quickly and she rarely has inventory. She relies more and more on her strong association with the Folk Art Center in Morehead, which does gallery exhibits of her work and sell it in their retail space.

Her connection to the land lies mainly in the fact that she has always gathered her materials. Although she has carved with maple and other wood, her choice is basswood (Lynwood). At one time, she collected her basswood from the

surrounding land, though according to her and Herman, they have gathered all the suitable wood and will have to look for a new place to find needed materials. To work the wood she uses her band saw and a chain saw to rough some pieces, though her main tools are still a pocketknife and a hatchet.

She refuses to take commissions if people try to tell her what to make. She will only make what she wants to and in her style. She especially won't do snakes, devil figures or nudes. Her work is not anguished expression like some primitive or outsider style art, but always very cheerful and whimsical. She takes her role as a mentor to others seriously, and many of her newer ventures are collaborations. Her son and grandson are both artists, and she feels they will continue to carry on a tradition she founded. She has been honored by Morehead State University with an honorary Doctorate, a Governor's Award for Excellence in the Arts by the Commonwealth of Kentucky, and many other certificates and honors that hang on her living room wall.