

Saddle Up!

Ride into the Artistic Frontier with The Trail of Painted Ponies

“**W**hat’s so much fun about The Trail of Painted Ponies is the opportunity it gives us to discover artistically talented people in surprising places,” says founder Rod Barker, who remembers the kick he got out of an unsuccessful effort made to involve a famous cowboy artist in painting a Pony. “Sure,’ he said, ‘I’d be glad to.’ So I delivered one of the life-sized fiberglass Ponies to his studio in the back of my pickup. A month later I called to check on the progress. A different-sounding person apologized and said he had racked his brain trying to come up with an idea but nothing had come to mind, and would I please come back and pick up the horse.”

In contrast, he recalls Amber Sielesnew, a young nursing student from Indiana who was given a Paint Your Own Pony Kit as a gift from her mother and encouraged to try her hand at painting a Pony. She submitted her design to The



Trail, which featured several well-worn dollar bills wrapped around a rearing Pony, and it became the cleverly titled and just released figurine, “Buckskin.”

ABOVE: Scandinavia has a rich artistic tradition featuring stunning patterns and brilliant colors woven into dazzling wool sweaters. This artistry dates back to the Vikings in the 9th century. “Mr. Winter” (6 inches high x 7 inches long) represents one of the premier Nordic folk arts, showcasing this unique style of knitting developed in these ancient, icy lands. Warm your heart with this classic winter wonder, srp \$45. www.TrailofPaintedPonies.com



Amber Sielesnew at work on her Paint Your Own Pony Kit, featuring dollar bills wrapped around a rearing Pony. It became the cleverly titled and just released figurine “Buckskin.”

From its inception in 2001 as a Santa Fe, New Mexico-based public art exhibition, The Trail of Painted Ponies has been guided by two beliefs.

First, that from prehistory to the present, in the United States and around the world, the horse has been a magnificent source of inspiration that has been interpreted and presented by artists with endless variety and invention, and that its power to inspire endures.

And secondly, that America’s got talent. That across this great land there are thousands of unknown as well as

Rod Barker, founder/CEO, and Karlynn Keyes, President, of The Trail of Painted Ponies. www.TrailofPaintedPonies.com



known, emerging as well as established, both young and adult people, who are gifted with creative abilities, and whose imagination is ignited in a special way by the idea of the horse as a canvas.

By combining the two, by inviting artists to creatively transform elegant horse sculptures into stunningly original artworks that are then crafted into a dazzling collection of highly detailed figurines, The Trail is honoring the distinguished tradition of the horse in art, at the same time it is bringing something excitingly new and different, with handcrafted authenticity, to the gift and collectible world.

From their Pueblo-style offices in Carefree, Arizona, Barker and Karlynn Keyes, President of The Trail of Painted Ponies, manage The Trail of Painted Ponies, which in the 10 years since it stamped into prominence as a public art exhibition has become one of the most admired and widely recognized collectible brands in the country. Although neither has a background in the licensing and collectible industry — Rod is a former bestselling author of true crime non-fiction books, while Keyes' experience is in interior design and business development — “For some reason we're good at this,” Keyes says.

A lot of their time is spent working with their “stable” of artists, which means reviewing design submissions that come in almost daily from around the country, and helping artists shape good ideas so that they accommodate the unique demands of a horse-shaped medium. The

Native American Painted Ponies, many designed by tribal artists, have developed a consistently strong following, “but the beauty of The Trail lies in its fantastic diversity,” Barker points out. “Patriotic, inspirational, whimsical, Western, musical — there's a Painted Pony for everybody.”

Keyes has shown a special interest in cultivating new artists. Whether it's working with school teachers to help students find their Inner Painted Pony Artist, or developing the Celebrity Collection and interesting iconic Hollywood celebrities



Introducing a new category of room décor items from The Trail of Painted Ponies, which includes these assorted fun plush pillows.

such as Tony Curtis, Barbara Eden, and Phyllis Diller in showcasing another side to their creativity by painting a Pony, she has taken the lead in the talent search.

When they aren't working on the business side of The Trail — adding new features such as social media to their award-winning website that they update monthly (www.trailofpaintedponies.com),

or providing retailers with merchandising materials and organizing artist signings — Barker and Keyes can often be found communicating with collectors. “In this economy, superior customer service and the personal touch are critical,” says Keyes.

Working with their licensing partner Enesco, they also spend a fair amount of time brainstorming about ways of expanding The Trail of Painted Ponies into new ranges. Adding a spectacular Christmas centerpiece (see cover of magazine) to their annual Holiday-themed Painted Pony figurine and ornament offerings is the outcome of one of those sessions.

While the figurines have proven to be a collectible treasured by collectors everywhere, The Trail is celebrating its 10th anniversary by increasing its product formats to include, among other items, keepsake boxes and, debuting at the trade shows in January 2012, an exciting selection of home décor items inspired by one of the most popular Painted Ponies, “Cowgirl Cadillac.”

And so the adventure continues as The Trail of Painted Ponies thoughtfully embraces new frontiers with fine products all carefully crafted by Enesco.

In the future, collectors can look forward to even more “creative expressions” coming down The Trail, as it continues to explore new artistic horizons in the gift and collectible world,

Happy Collecting and Happy Trails! ♦