

# A stickler for the details

## Wayne College professor creates her own line of 'Cat Lady Dolls'

By **PAUL LOCHER**  
Staff Writer

**MARSHALLVILLE** — A new line of handmade dolls, proving to be popular Christmas gifts at a couple of area stores, is the product of the skilled hands of an area woman.

Emily Rock, a biology professor at The University of Akron Wayne College for 20 years, is a longtime doll lover who, for several years, has been experimenting with creating her own brand of dolls. And this year Rock suspects she has perhaps finally hit on the right formula with her unveiling of "Cat Lady Dolls" — so named because of the five cats she owns that have garnered her that nickname.

A native of Baltimore, Md., who moved to Ohio 30 years ago when her husband, Larry, took a job with the Goodyear Tire & Rubber Company, Emily Rock said she virtually grew up with a needle and thread in her hand.

"I've always sewed and done needlework, as far back as I can remember," said Rock, "so this was a natural thing for me to do."

Rock has enjoyed her work at Wayne College.

"I love the students and I love teaching," she said, adding she is known as something of a stickler for detail in taking classwork to the molecular level, even though "it drives my students nuts."

And it was a high level of detail that also defined her work when she started five years ago to develop her own line of dolls, taking her cues from historical dolls and period fashion pictured in books. Therefore her primitive dolls, whose costuming ranges from the 1680s up to 1900, have exquisite detailing which ranges from their bonnets, mob caps and other fashionable haberdashery to the vests, aprons, shirts, blouses, dresses and gowns, all of which she custom crafts for each doll.

Rock said she particularly likes the styles and fabrics of the 1720s — like those popular in colonial Williamsburg — because of the beautiful detailing and embroidery.

As a matter of fact, Rock concedes the most difficult part of creating the dolls — each of which requires several hours of labor — is getting the clothes to fit exactly right.

Because her creations are only about 10 inches tall, she said the myriad of fabrics she uses cannot be bulky. Therefore she constantly keeps an eye out for

thin, small-print fabrics which would work well within the historical context of her creations.

She said that sometimes she even finds inspiration in shirts her husband or other relatives are currently wearing and which she readily admits she covets until it is time for them to be discarded, at which time she moves in to claim the castoffs.

Consequently, each of her dolls is a one-of-a-kind endeavor which she says likely can't be recreated exactly.

Final detailing includes adorning the outfits she has created with miniature pins, brooches or other tiny items she finds online.

In addition, she always has the doll carrying an item suggesting what activity it might be engaged in.

"That's the kind of detail I always look for on a doll that would make me want to buy it, so I just assume this is what would interest other people as well," Rock said. She noted that she can only make about six of the dolls per month — and only when school and personal responsibilities aren't pressing.

In the past Rock's dolls had drawn-on hair in keeping with historical tradition, but the artist said she "found the courage" to experiment — successfully — with a variety of wigs and hair treatments. Facial details, however, remain simple in keeping with the historical tradition she adheres to.

In a departure from traditional methodology, however, Rock does not fill the dolls' bodies with sawdust, saying she initially attempted that with disastrous results.

Instead she opts for a more versatile modern poly fiber. Rock, whose dolls can be found at both the Pine Tree Barn in Wooster and Country From The Heart in Berlin, says that making the dolls are a "creative outlet" which helps her relax and get her mind off the classroom.

Rita Dush, co-owner of the Pine Tree Barn with her husband, Roger, said they decided to market the doll line because "they are beautiful and well-done, and fit with the primitive kind of decor we specialize in."

Dush said she was very impressed with Rock's dolls, and noted, "You could look far and wide and not find anything else like them. They're wonderful."

Larry Rock calls his wife's creativity in producing the line "mind-boggling," and says, "that level of detail would drive me



Mike Schenk photo

**Emily Rock, a biology professor at The University of Akron Wayne College, displays her new line of one-of-a-kind primitive dolls. Their costumes are representative of styles from the 1680s to 1900.**

crazy."

Larry, who does carpentry at Wayne College since his retirement from Goodyear, said he helps occasionally by constructing stands for the dolls or helping wire on the small wigs.

As for Rock, she said she is flattered to have the two well-

known local retailers sell her dolls.

"There is so much stuff out there that is competing in the market place," said Rock, "I just feel very honored that they selected my work."

Rock says she is constantly working to improve her dolls.

"I'm a scientist by nature. So," she explained, "it makes sense for me to experiment and keep trying different things."

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