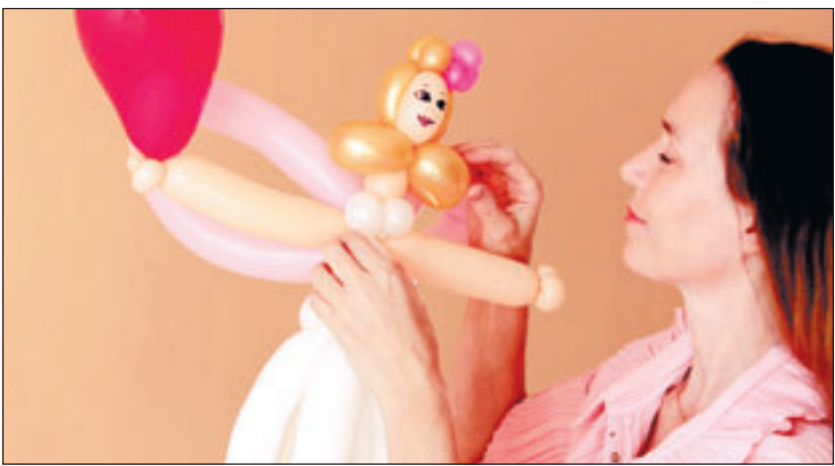


PROFILES IN DESIGN

Russian doctor finds a different kind of career in the United States — making elaborate balloon sculptures

expanding her horizons



WHAT A DOLL: Patterson adjusts her Love Fairy.

BY DAISY OLIVERA
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Most people are either “right brain” or “left brain.” Balloon artist Irina Patterson is both. She creates dozens of elaborate balloon sculptures — from an entire menagerie to fairy tale characters — yet in her native Russia she worked as an emergency room doctor.

“When you’re growing up in Russia, if you graduate with highest honors from high school you can go to any college without taking entrance exams and the education is free. I was interested in medicine as a subject but it turned out, doing it daily was boring,” she recalls. She was yearning for something more creative.

“You can’t make a living as an artist. Not that you can make a living as a doctor either. The monthly wage there is equivalent to \$120 a month,” she says. While attending high school, she also earned a degree from a four-year art college where she “was introduced to all different sides of art.”

Patterson came to the United States on a visit in 1992 and was introduced to the man who became her husband.

“I had no interest in medicine here, so I did some modeling briefly,” she says. “I didn’t understand it because growing up in Russia there was no such thing, but I was fascinated with fashion.”

She confides that her so-called claim to fame while modeling was as a body double for Cindy Crawford in *Fair Game*. With a smirk she adds, “I stood there forever while they adjusted lights

and set up cameras — very glamorous.”

After a stint in tech support for a software company, she tried public relations. Patterson was still searching for an inspiration when, about a year ago, she saw someone making balloons. “It was a little dog. It was quick, colorful and much faster than doing a painting,” she says.

“I’d never seen long balloons before.” She was captivated and decided to investigate further. “I went to a shop that sells them for professionals and found hundreds of colors — like a palette — a creative toolbox so I can express myself,” she explains.

Patterson took her newfound art to Coconut Grove’s Cocowalk, where she practiced in front of the crowd.

At first, she gave the balloon figures away free but then people began asking her to create balloons. “I’ve been to every country club and party. Children want Disney figures. At glamorous society parties, they love monkeys. You’d think the ladies would like flowers but they love monkeys in a banana tree!” she says. “I can make anything — ballerinas, dolls, dragons, dogs, cats, tigers, horses, every animal, even alligators and butterflies.”

She averages five parties a week, carrying a portfolio of balloon sculptures she has done. “I custom-create whatever the person wants on the spot,” she says, averaging about 15 figures per hour.

For a party, Patterson charges by the hour, but can make balloons on request, for anywhere \$10 to \$50 (for an elaborate request).

She also makes elaborate hats — like Easter bonnets.

For Valentine’s Day, she creates “the girl of their dreams, a princess, Cupid, a monkey holding a heart or even a frog,” she says with a wink. And for those who want to say it with flowers: bouquets of blooming balloons.

She says people at parties ask if her husband is a clown. He’s not; he’s a psychologist who also writes poetry.

She says she does not have a favorite sculpture. She loves all of them and the audience, too.

“It’s a performance and in order to finish it quickly, you need someone to stand and wait for it. The process is a big part of it both for the person who is watching and for me,” she says. “I feed off of the enthusiasm and excitement people show me and it’s very fulfilling.”



BALLOON HEAD: Irina Patterson models her Love Crown, an elaborate hat appropriate for Valentine’s Day.

SMART BOX

Name: Irina Patterson
Company: Irina, the Balloon Lady; 786-301-2456
Personal: born in Russia
Design philosophy: to celebrate life. As a doctor I saw that life is really short. If everyone realized that, they would appreciate it more.
Inspired by: My husband’s poetry