

Artist's multi-faceted works more than a portrait of her talent Creations take many forms, blending modern with classic

By Danna Zabrovsky, The Ottawa Citizen July 11, 2010



Rosemary Scragg shows a photo of her award-winning penguin creation Aunt Arctica strolling along Liverpool's Penny Lane. Scragg's body of art is also linked to famous Ottawa landmarks like Tin House facade in the ByWard Market.

Photograph by: Mike Carocetto, The Ottawa Citizen

Rosemary Scragg has a knack for infusing ancient works with a hint of modern artistry. In her studio, located in a 15th-floor apartment overlooking the Rideau River, a 1515 painting of a cherub playing a lute has been transformed into a textured sculpture. Her work includes a mould of the archangel Gabriel, rendered from a 15th-century Russian painting. Scragg's version lends new life and emotion to the ancient figure, who is raised from a golden background and flanked by a turquoise stone frame.

Last fall, Scragg strayed from her fine-art forte when she entered a competition to beautify a fibreglass penguin. Yes, a penguin. Scragg's niece presented her with a miniature penguin last Christmas, when Scragg visited family in her hometown of Liverpool, England. "My niece just pushed this gift at me and said, 'Get busy. While you're here, make yourself useful,'" Scragg said.

Paint-your-own-penguin kits were sold in Liverpool stores around Christmas 2009. They were part of a campaign created by Wild in Art, an organization dedicated to raising awareness of challenges facing animals worldwide, through sculptures.

The Go Penguins campaign ran from mid-November 2009 to mid-January 2010, and involved 235 penguin sculptures decorated by artists, celebrities and community groups in Liverpool to raise awareness about climate change.

Scragg's niece entered her in the Paint Your Own Penguin competition. Her penguin, named Aunt Arctica, was one of five winners among hundreds of entries.

"It was humorous," said Sally Ann Wilkinson, director of Wild in Art. "It was a nice caricature that she'd used proportionally with the penguin's shape. It worked as a character."

Aunt Arctica looks like a granny with a beak. Her hand — er, wing — clutches a navy-blue purse with a gold clasp. Her dainty lace gloves match her black slippers. Her flat black hat is adorned with blue and red flowers, which match her flower-pattern, three-quarter-length skirt.

Aunt Arctica's grey hair is a shade darker than her blue blouse, which has a frilly snow-white collar which buttons at the top with a cameo that complements her bright, yellow bird eyes.

As a winner of the competition, Scragg's mini-penguin was turned into a three-foot penguin, which currently resides with Scragg's family in Liverpool.

"She's in the bosom of her family," Scragg said. "She's just going from one family's home to another, because no one can decide really on a suitable public location."

While pictures show Aunt Arctica strolling along Liverpool's Penny Lane, Scragg's body of work is also linked to famous Ottawa landmarks.

Scragg said she is best known for her rendering of the Tin House facade in the ByWard Market. She has also created renderings of the Sussex Drive angel statue and of a painting in the House of Commons of John Cabot arriving on the shores of Newfoundland.

"I've always been an artist. I was intended to go into fine arts when I was 18," she said.

Scragg learned of a program on enlightened, avant-garde methods of teaching young children and chose to study education, despite her artistic leanings.

She came to Canada with an education degree at age 26, and earned an honours degree in visual art at the University of Ottawa as a mature student.

But Scragg's own art stopped in its tracks when she chose teaching. She taught in the Arctic for two years when she was in her late 20s, and continued to teach until she realized art was drawing her back.

"It's just who I am," she said.

Her art takes many forms, from mixed media to huge works of abstract expressionism to stained glass. Art history interests her most these days.

"I just love some of the esthetic of the artists of the Middle Ages. I love the stylized charm of it all," she said.

Scragg said she loves creating artwork of a spiritual nature, especially angels.

Many of her more recent works are plaster castings, which she creates using polyurethane molds and polymer clay.

She is particularly fond of a rendition of the archangel Michael, which she designed herself. He is a warrior, with a breastplate and halo of glass.

"I wanted to give the impression of great beauty and great strength," Scragg said.

As for Aunt Arctica, Scragg said her family is having trouble choosing a public place to display her.

Scragg's niece is working on a website where schools and hospitals will be able to rent the penguin for short periods of time.

"I want to see this in the community," she said.

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