

Good eggs

Carver turns shells into collectible art

Kathleen Renne

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If you're in Darlene Kokotailo's garage and find it reminds you vaguely of a dentist's office, don't be surprised. That's normal.

"It smells just like a dental office," says Kokotailo of her work environment.

Not that she's working with teeth.

Amid stacks of boxes, Kokotailo sits at a small table covered with a glass hood, under which her hands are manipulating a small drill.

Masked and gloved, the sound of the drill whirring, Kokotailo is carefully etching out an image of a rose. Not on wood, not on metal, on an eggshell. Yes, an eggshell. (The burning of the shell's protein and calcium create the dentist-office odour.)

Tiny bursts of dust are created as she digs a little deeper into the shell. But not too deep.

For this project, she doesn't want to cut right through the shell; she just wants to carve a design onto its surface.

"The intricate carving, it pushes you to see how far you can go," Kokotailo says.

"It's not as fragile as you may think, but if you don't cut it right, it can go very quickly," she adds.

When most people think of egg art, they think Ukrainian pysanky. That is not something Kokotailo does. Her specialty lies in the carving.

One of her creations sitting near her workspace literally looks like a piece of lace formed and lacquered into the shape of an egg.

Kokotailo has been working for 20 years with eggs of all varieties: goose, duck, ostrich, emu, quail and rhea.

The only kind she doesn't work with is the one most familiar to the grocery-store shopper: the chicken egg.

Kokotailo buys her eggs in the spring from local farmers and the Hutterites.

She washes them with vinegar, before drilling holes in them and using an air compressor to blow out the yolks.

Needless to say, Kokotailo has become something of a specialist when it comes to eggs.

So much so that, on a couple of occasions, farmers consulted her about the low birth rates among their birds,



CREDIT: Ted Jacob, Calgary Herald
artist darlene kokotailo says when it comes to egg art, one trait is required above all: patience.

a problem she was able to help them with when she saw they were using lead pencil and tape on the eggshells, hence poisoning the developing bird inside.

"Most people don't think of them as a living organism," she says.

Kokotailo turns the cleaned, emptied shells into collectible artwork that appears atop wedding cakes, hanging from Christmas trees, or serving as tiny jewel boxes.

"A lot of people will put it down as a little craft. Actually, it's a fine art," she says.

To call Kokotailo's work "detailed" is an understatement. Consider this: Kokotailo took about 130 hours to create the floral-etched ostrich egg for her daughter's wedding cake topper.

The work is meticulous right down to the microscopic signature on all her works.

"The drill I'm using is like a dental drill. You have to be watching what you're doing. If you blink or sneeze . . . You must have a steady hand. If you make a mistake, you can't go back; if you drop it, you're finished," she says.

Of course, it helps that Kokotailo has an art background. She studied commercial art in school, and did paper tolling and sketching before she took up working with eggs.

One trait, however, is required above all: patience.

"Patience, patience, patience. If you don't have that, you'll never do it," she says.

Not only does she carve designs into the shells. She also adds chains to them, dots microscopic Swarovski crystals across them, and creates little scenes inside them using tiny resin or clay figurines.

Egg art is personal for Kokotailo, who also keeps busy boarding ESL students and entertaining her three young grandsons.

Not only does she give her eggs to friends and family, she also incorporated hair from her much-beloved cat (now deceased) into one of her creations. Her cat's whiskers formed the antennae on a tiny butterfly she carved from a goose egg.

Like any art, working with eggs has its hazards.

Though she is careful to wear a mask, the dust gives her regular sinus infections. There is also the remote possibility of salmonella lurking, and, of course, there's the ever-present worry of dropping one of the fragile creations, something that has happened on occasion.

"I had just spent 13 hours working on a new design when my daughter came downstairs. I handed her the egg, and she missed the string. It dropped on the floor. We just stood there and laughed. That's all you can do," she says.

She creates anywhere from 900-to-1200 eggs to sell at Christmas.

But the reaction of the recipients is what remains most special to her. "To see their faces when they get their egg, it's very precious to see that," she says.