

Artful Adventurer

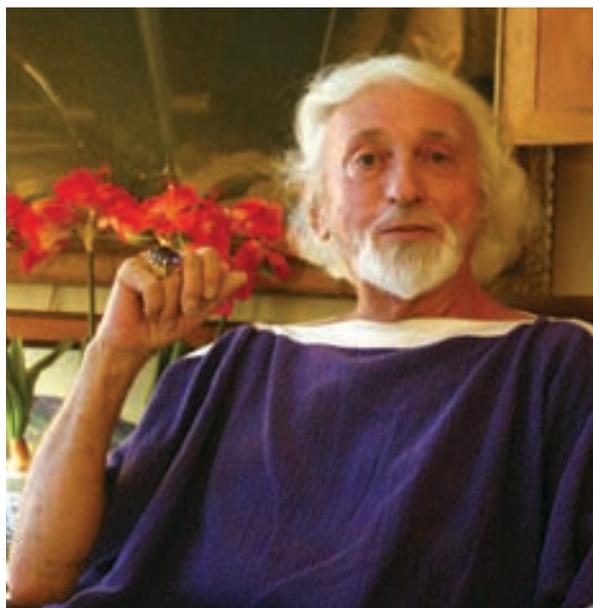


In this photograph, fashion dolls created by Pete Ballard that depict ladies of the nineteenth century are on exhibition at the Grave Creek Mound Museum in Moundsville, West Virginia. Photo courtesy of the West Virginia Division of Culture and History

► Pete Ballard in his Peterstown home © Jeff Pierson

A Visit with Pete Ballard

By Emma Eisenberg
Unless noted, photographs by Tyler Evert



Nationally renowned costume designer, doll maker, and painter Pete Ballard feels at home in Peterstown, West Virginia. So at home, in fact, that during the course of a meal with this writer at Peterstown's Hometown Diner, Ballard adjusted the speed of the restaurant's ceiling fan and was brought cup after cup of coffee without having to so much as signal.

"I would starve in the streets without the Hometown Diner," Ballard says of the local eatery, which is just doors away from his apartment off of Peterstown's main drag.

Above the stairs that lead into Ballard's second-floor abode hangs this framed adage: "People who keep perfect houses lead dull lives." Even the most cursory glance around Ballard's apartment reveals a life that is anything but dull. Every inch of his walls is covered with signed photographs of movie and theater stars and photographs from his travels to Saudi Arabia, London, and Rome.

There are also framed letters from important dignitaries thanking him for his contributions to the arts; announcements for exhibitions of Ballard's fashion dolls; and Ballard family memorabilia showcasing his pre-Civil War roots in Peterstown and his great-grandfather's distinguished record as one of West Virginia's founding fathers and first legislators.

In truth, Ballard's living room functions as a kind of in-home gallery, displaying his still-life paintings and a selection of the 40-inch fashion dolls that have made his name.

Ballard was born in 1931 in Welch, West Virginia, which was then a prosperous coal town. He credits his precocious interest in art and high fashion to early exposure to Welch's vibrant cultural offerings of orchestra performances, vaudeville acts, and tea dances.

"It was exciting," he says. "I'm awfully glad God allowed me to be born there." Ballard drew inspiration from the movies of the 1930s and fashion magazines of the day. And in the absence of any costume design books in Welch, he learned to design and sew by simply doing it.

While an undergraduate at Concord College (now Concord University) in Athens, West Virginia, in the early 1950s, Ballard was strongly influenced by Dr. Frank Stein, then head of Concord's drama department. "He taught me everything I needed to know about the theater," says Ballard. That knowledge would serve him well later on.

As a young adult, Ballard continued to work in the theater, designing costumes for summer stock productions at Last Chance Gulch Theater in Helena, Montana; the Dunes Art Foundation in Michigan City; and Denison University in Granville, Ohio. He was offered several opportunities to go into professional theater costume design, but he refused them all.

A Passion for Teaching

“My great love is teaching,” says Ballard, who, upon graduation from Concord, decided to begin teaching English and composition in War, West Virginia.

Ballard is a great believer in what he calls “God working”—that is, trust that a greater force is at work, and you will go place to place and end up where you need to be. For Ballard, this took the form of moving to Saudi Arabia to work for an Arabian-American oil company that was hiring English teachers.

From there, he was asked by the state department to go to the University of Saigon in Vietnam and was then invited by the People’s Republic of China to continue his English teaching at the University of Beijing.

He also traveled as a tourist to Japan, London, and Rome,

This fashion doll depicts a woman’s winter at-home attire circa 1862. She wears a wine wool skirt and matching jacket, and carries a paisley shawl. Photo courtesy of the West Virginia Division of Culture and History



where at a luncheon, he met Sarah Churchill, daughter of former Prime Minister Winston Churchill.

“The luncheon was incredibly boring,” says Ballard. “Sarah and I both went out onto the terrace and struck up a conversation.” He and Sarah Churchill became close friends, and the occasion for Ballard to meet Winston Churchill himself soon arose. “We were together in his studio for six hours for lunch. I’ve never laughed so much,” says Ballard. “We were both amateur painters, both trying to figure out what made color work.”

But in 1966, Ballard followed his heart back to the States, explaining, “I wanted green instead of desert.” He began his longtime career teaching English and literature to high school students at the University of North Carolina School of the Arts in Winston-Salem. His favorite, he says, was teaching tenth grade.

“Teaching was never boring,” says Ballard with a smile. “I always jumped out of bed in the morning, I was so excited to go to school.”

Restoring Antique Costumes

But for Ballard, a quiet life of teaching was not to be. At a theater convention, he met and hit it off with Stella Blum, curator of the Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Blum gave him full access to all the antique clothing in the Costume Institute, and she eventually enlisted Ballard as a restorer for the museum’s collection.

Antique clothing restoration was a fledgling field at that time, Ballard explains. “They needed anyone who had historical knowledge as a costume designer.” Ballard was a pioneer; plus, he did the work for free. When his restorations were exhibited, they received glowing praise.

Word of his talents spread quickly, and soon he spent many weekends driving to museums all over the Eastern seaboard to restore their costume holdings. He also started costume collections for the Mint Museum of Charlotte, North Carolina; the Reynolds House Museum of American Art in Winston-Salem; and many other southern museums. This work earned him the Award of Merit from the North Carolina Historic Preservation Society and a Golden Award from the National Retail Merchants Association.

Ballard enjoyed restoration and curation work immensely, noting that it wasn’t uncommon for him to stay up until one in the morning on a school night talking to Stella Blum. “You’ll never guess, I finally figured out the solution!” he often told her, after considering how to restore a particularly difficult material.

But restoration work was time consuming, and with so many museums and collections making demands on his schedule, Ballard decided to marry his old love of costume design with small museums’ desires to showcase historical fashions. Thus, the idea for his fashion dolls was born.

The Ultimate Challenge

“The fashion dolls were the answer to all the little museums that didn’t have costume collections, plus they were easier to produce,” says Ballard.

Standing 40 inches tall with papier maché bodies, Ballard’s dolls took about six weeks each to produce. They were modeled on specific period fashions, painstakingly researched and reproduced from fashion plates of the era.

So seriously did Ballard take the task of replicating every detail of the historic fashion that sometimes a single element would take him years to complete. For example, he spent six years looking for just the right claret velvet for Scarlett O’Hara’s birthday dress for his *Gone with the Wind* doll collection. (He acquired other materials for this collection from his personal connections with Hollywood designer Walter Plunkett and the film’s star, Vivien Leigh.) Similarly, a search

for one rhinestone took him to a custom jeweler in Las Vegas.

Why does he love making fashion dolls so much? The reason, Ballard explains, is a great deal about the challenge. He asks himself, “Can I do it or can’t I?”

It’s not, he adds, about the money. “I’ve earned my living as a teacher,” he says. “Everything I do in the arts is donated. I’m not flush with money, but I always find a way.”

Indeed, Ballard has donated all his dolls to museums and historic houses, and they have also toured nationwide. The collection of 50 dolls he created for the state of West Virginia is still touring. The West Virginia State Museum contains several of Ballard’s dolls, and, in 2007, the State Culture Center hosted a gala in his honor and an exhibition of his fashion dolls and paintings.

“I’m trying to give everything I own away,” says Ballard, gesturing toward his still-life paintings that cover the wall

Pete Ballard says that creating his historically accurate costumed dolls is his biggest artistic challenge.



behind him. These will join his dolls in museums and art galleries across the country.

“I’m not into selling myself,” he emphasizes. “I’m not into all those things people in the arts are into.”

More than 80 years old, Ballard has retired to Peterstown, where he says he mostly stays these days. “I’m up to my neck in work,” he says, but adds, “I’ve been blessed all my life because I love what I do. I call it play instead of work.”

Ballard doesn’t have to travel much to still experience a cosmopolitan lifestyle. Since he’s lived in Peterstown, his visitors have included the actress Vivien Leigh; then-Governor Joe Manchin and First Lady Gayle Manchin (both Manchins attended Ballard’s 80th birthday party); and a number of his former students from Winston-Salem, including Jillian Murphy, a principal ballerina with the American Ballet Theatre.

There’s even talk that filmmaker Craig Spurlock, brother

of Morgan Spurlock, the filmmaker and Beckley native who created the documentary *Super Size Me*, is interested in featuring Ballard in a short documentary.

Despite his travels and famous connections, Ballard seems most at home reclining in his living room, surrounded by his art and the memories that document his very un-dull life.

“I love Peterstown,” he says, fluffing a doll’s skirt. “I’m very blessed to live here. It’s full of marvelous people.” 🍷

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◀ **The artist poses in** his home with some of his treasures, including a painting of his mother.

▶ **Pete Ballard paints in** his home studio.

▶ **Pete Ballard’s walls are** covered with signed photographs of movie stars, thank-you letters from dignitaries, exhibit announcements, and other keepsakes. © Jeff Pierson

