

Michael Langton Interview

Meet the man who “cloned” Hitty

By Wendi Dunn

Only one real Hitty exists (see “[Who is Hitty](#)”), and she resides in the Stockbridge Library in Stockbridge, Massachusetts. But what if there was a way to make “clones” of Hitty for multiple collectors to own? I am referring to the resin Hitty dolls made by artist Michael Langton. My post called “[Hitty Dimensions](#)” featured some of his Hitty dolls, such as the Stockbridge Hitty, part of the Stockbridge Library Heirloom Collector’s Set. Stockbridge Hitty was created using a 3D laser scan of the original doll. Michael made molds from the digital data and filled those molds with “porcelite,” a wood and resin mix. From head to toe, Stockbridge Hitty was a true Hitty clone! Michael later went on to produce other resin Hitty dolls.

Michael has had a long and distinguished career as a doll artist. He was accepted as a member of NIADA in 1984. That same year, he was chosen by *Esquire* magazine as one of the top 250 Americans under the age of 40, for his innovative artistic achievements. Later on, he won the DOTY award for one of his hand-carved multi-jointed wooden dolls. As Hitty collectors, we can count ourselves fortunate that he chose to clone Hitty as one of his signature projects.

Recently, I contacted Michael, and he very graciously agreed to answer some questions for my website, *A Tale of Two Hittys*.

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Stockbridge Library Heirloom Collector’s Set

How did you first learn that the Stockbridge Library wanted you to reproduce Hitty?

I had carved the doll, “Elmer,” for the film *On Golden Pond*. Over 300 dolls were presented to the ITC Film company over the course of three months, and all had been rejected for one reason or another. A ventriloquist was doing her performance at the hotel where the movie people were staying. In her performance she mentioned that I had made the wooden dummy’s head. This caused the Property Master to have someone contact me about possibly carving a wooden doll for them. This was the doll that Katharine Hepburn and the ITC film company accepted for the part in the film. Subsequently, Katharine received an Oscar for her role in the film.

Good luck was with me, and I was able to maintain ownership of the doll, and I was able to take possession of it after the filming was completed. When Katharine heard that I was planning to keep the doll, she asked if I would mind if she signed it. She had a reputation of not signing autographs, so her signing the doll and then receiving the award made the doll very valuable. Elmer was the first doll that I made, and the recognition I received allowed me to start making more wooden dolls. The dolls were all carved wood and were one-of-a-kind. This is a very difficult position to be in as an artist, because a successful piece could not be made into an edition. If two people wanted it, only one could purchase it. So, I thought about the possibility of finding a way to edition Elmer. I wanted to take advantage of the interest he had created and find an affordable way for the people who were interested to purchase a copy.



Elmer doll reproduction by Michael Langton

I had to invent “porcelite,” a wood-flour-based resin, to cast the edition of Elmers. This took a while to solve the problems with casting “wood,” but I eventually developed a formula and a technique that was successful. With great trepidation, I took the very valuable Elmer and poured silicone rubber on all the wooden parts to make the production molds. This was very scary because if the silicone absorbed into the wood, it would have destroyed this relic. I could risk it, because it was my doll.

The Elmer dolls were signed on the chest, because that is where Katherine signed the original Elmer. That’s the reason too, that I sign my hand-carved wooden dolls on the chest.

There were other things I did to make this edition unique, but to answer your question as to why the Library contacted me it was this: I had taken a very valuable wooden doll and made a successful edition of it. The Library wanted me to do the same thing by developing an edition of “Hitty,” their very valuable wooden doll.

What happened to the original Elmer doll?

After Katharine Hepburn died, I sold the original Elmer to the Rosalie Whyel Museum of Doll Art. This was a better environment than sitting on a shelf in my shop. Far more people would be able to see him and appreciate the story.

Elmer sold recently at a Theriault’s auction for only \$1,500. What are your thoughts on that?

Whoever bought it got an extremely good deal. I wish I had known it was up for sale. I would have tried to buy it.

The Oscars’ 95th anniversary celebration is coming up soon. After all this time, no prop used in the production was ever signed by two of the people associated with the film who received Oscars for their participation. Ernest Thompson received the Oscar for “Best Adapted Screenplay” of a play he originally wrote. Mr. Thompson created the character of Elmer. Katharine Hepburn won for “Best Actress.” She brought the character of Elmer to life. Both of these people signed Elmer.

The uniqueness of this fact leaves me to believe that if Elmer had been in a Hollywood Collector’s auction, the selling price would have been very different. But that is just my opinion.

(Editor’s note: see [Lot #294 “ROSALIE - A Life of Dolls, Part II” Day Two](#) on the Theriault’s website. The Academy Awards debuted in 1929, the same year the Hitty book was published.)

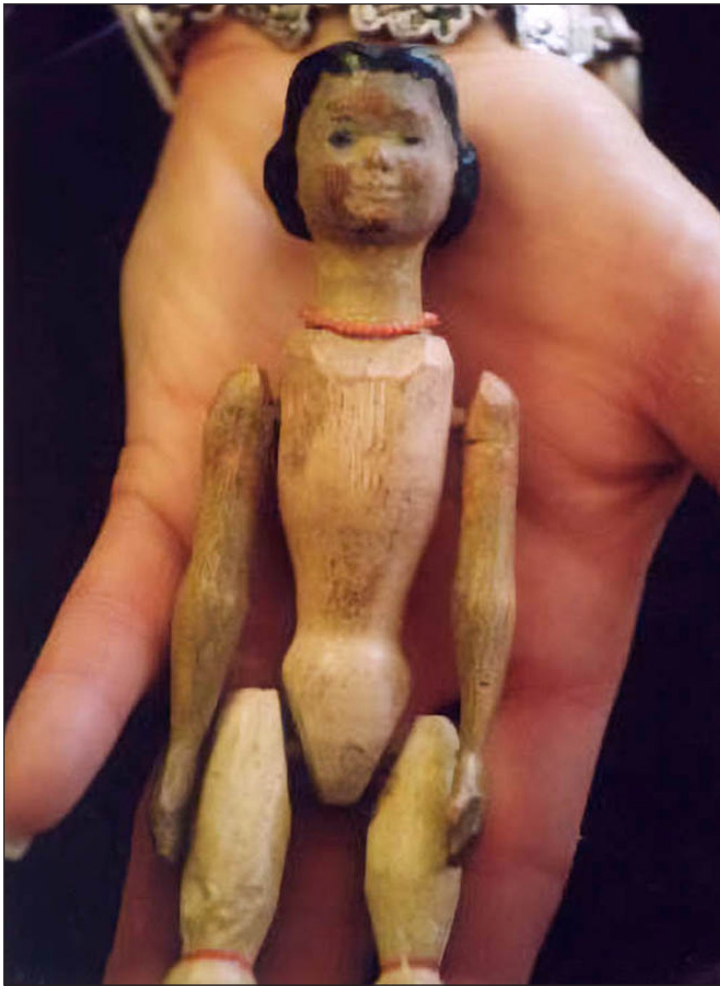
How did you make a copy of the real Hitty for the Collector’s Set?

The Stockbridge Library would not allow me to pour silicone over Hitty to make the production molds. They were afraid that the silicone might be absorbed into the wood, or that the silicone mold could pull some of the original paint off. These were both serious concerns. After contemplating it for a while, I came up with the idea to digitize Hitty with a laser. The only contact with Hitty would be light. There would be no danger of destroying any paint or damaging Hitty with the silicone.

One of the techniques used to determine if an item is a copy is to measure it against a known original. If it is smaller, there is a good chance it is a copy. Items shrink in the process of copying them. What I was able to do was to have the digital file (established by the laser) enlarged to compensate for the expected production shrink. That way the copy and the original would be the same size.

Did you bring the laser scanner to the library, or did you have to take Hitty out of the library?

The Library let me take Hitty to get her scanned. It took a week to get the scanning done. While I had her, I photographed her extensively and found some original paint under the armpits that I was able to match. She was all dirty, and most of the paint was worn off. I wasn’t going to clean her to find out what the underlying color was, so it was fortunate to have a pristine sample to compare to. There was enough information in one of the eyes for me to reproduce the color and size of the eyeball on the Collector’s Set. The location of the garter on her leg was very apparent, so that was easy to reproduce. I could not determine what actual wood was used for the original Hitty. To do that I would have had to clean it and scrape some paint off. This was something I definitely would not do. It was not necessary to know that for the production. I was just curious as a woodcarver.



Original Hitty doll, undressed in preparation for scanning

Who produced all the dolls?

All the work was done in my shop in Stratham, New Hampshire. Previously, I owned and ran a small non-ferrous foundry. It was a lost wax foundry, and this is where I learned mold-making. The foundry was not part of the shop where I produced the Hittys. I stopped doing the foundry work and donated the foundry to the art dept at the University of New Hampshire.

My shop consisted of a casting room, finishing room and wood shop. We were able to do all the work there and fabricate the Hitty trunks ourselves. I had an extremely talented employee named Dana Durkee. I could not have done it without his help.

How difficult was it to get legal protection for the project? Did you have to consult with a lawyer?

Legal protection was a concern, of course. There was no copyright on the original doll. None. Hitty was picked up at an antique store in New York City in the 1920s. There is no signature, no copyright sign, nothing. It was a public domain piece. Anyone could use it. After I had done all the work to reproduce her, anyone could have taken my reproduction and molded it and ran their own production legally. A lawyer working for the Library told them he could get a copyright on the original Hitty, but he was mistaken.

I did not want to invest a lot of money in a project where anyone could steal and compete with my own work. So that is why I decided to make the Collector's Set.

Simon and Schuster owned the copyright for the original book, *Hitty: Her First Hundred Years*, by Rachel Field and illustrated by Dorothy P. Lathrop. I contacted Simon and Schuster and got permission to reproduce the Hitty book in miniature. The original book was scanned and reduced in size to fit perfectly into the Hitty trunk. Thirteen hundred miniature books were printed to support the 1,000-piece edition. As you can imagine, this was very expensive to do. The original cover was reduced to better fit into this now miniature version. Now I had legal protection for the book.

I then took the illustration on page 39 that showed Hitty bent over her trunk. There was enough detail in the illustration so I could design and build a wooden trunk of my own. Because this was my design, I owned the copyright. So even if I couldn't get the legal protection on the original Hitty, I did have legal protection for the Set. No one could duplicate the Collector's Set.

The items in the set were all numbered. Each set had a Hitty: signed, numbered and dated. The book was signed, numbered and dated on the inside page, underneath Rachel Fields' autograph. On the trunk, I made a brand that I used to brand the inside. The brand was the same image the Stockbridge Library used on their books. This detail acknowledged the Library's role in the set. I signed, dated and numbered this brand to match the other two items, making it a SET: three items, one unit. If someone lost one item, whether it was the Hitty doll, the book or the trunk, they could not be replaced.

The process I used to duplicate the Hitty came directly from the original doll. It was not my or anyone's interpretation of Hitty. In a sense it was a clone of the original Hitty. A genetic tie, if you will, which separates this Hitty from any other Hittys that have ever been made. The uniqueness of this cannot be overstated.

Can you estimate how much it cost to develop the Collector's Set, including scanning, molding, prototyping, etc.?

I can't remember exactly, but it was tens of thousands of dollars. Not only did I have to pay for the development of the items, but I had to pay for all the additional tools and equipment to produce them.

Who owns the rights to the molds and where are they now?

I own them. All of them have been destroyed.

Do any digital files of Hitty's scans still exist?

I do not have any of the digital files used to create the Hitty.



Stockbridge Library Heirloom Collector's Set, courtesy of Margie S.

What made you decide to stop the edition at 100 dolls instead of 1,000?

My studio was producing and selling the Collector's Set exclusively at the beginning. There were doll shops that were asking me to wholesale the Set to them. I recognized the value of doll shops promoting the Sets and thought it would be beneficial for the different shops to help me do this. The problem was with the Library. Even though the Library had no legal right to the Hitty image, I was appreciative of them involving me in the production. Ordinarily, the royalty amount paid for a doll was from 1% to 6%. I offered the Library 25%. Looking back at it now, I recognize it was too generous. It was a mistake on my part. The royalty was to be paid as the Sets were sold. That was \$187.50 per set. The fact that I would have to wholesale the Sets and sell them for \$375.00 instead of \$750.00 caused me to go back to the Library and ask them to reconsider the \$187.50 royalty (that would apply only to the Sets sold at wholesale). They rebuffed my request and demanded I pay them the Total Royalty for the edition in advance. That was \$187,500. This was absurd. This started a legal conflict between them and me involving threats and recriminations. They behaved in the most greedy way. There was no level of appreciation or respect for the development of the Hitty Collector's Set by me. The joy of the accomplishment was changed. It now turned into a production motivated by resentment. I decided to stop the edition. I had

told every person that the edition size was going to be 1,000. So, I wrote to everyone I had sold Collector's Sets to and informed them of the change. None of the collectors contacted me to complain. I felt my responsibility was to the collectors rather than the Library. This is many years later, and it still bothers me.

Perfume Hitty

What first gave you the idea to make Perfume Hitty?

The Collector's Set was over. There was, as I stated earlier, no legal ownership to the Hitty image. I started casting Hittys and selling them individually without the trunk and book and without the dress used in the Set. I did not record the sales. There was no edition size. I made them and sold them, trying to recoup my investment in the Collector's Set. Some I had dresses made for. Some I sold with only the undergarments from the Set. This worked well because a number of people wanted to make their own clothes for her.

Hitty was a travel doll. People had sent me pictures of my cast Hittys at different places in the world. There were pictures of her with the Eiffel tower in the background. There was a picture with the leaning tower of Pisa, others in Israel, not to mention all the photos from here in the United States. So, I started thinking that I could design a function for Hitty to perform on these trips to "earn her keep," so to speak.

I had turned wooden pens out of exotic woods where I hollowed out the wood and inserted the pens. My source for



Perfume Hitty with removable head and applicator

pens also sold perfume containers. They were small, made of brass and had a screw top that covered the applicator. If I could install these in wood items that I had turned on the lathe, I could install them in my Hittys. I cut the head off one of the Hittys and drilled a hole in the torso from the neck to the hips big enough and long enough to insert the container part of the perfume. I drilled a hole in the head, being careful to not drill through the top of the head. In the head, I put the top of the perfume container that protected the felt applicator. I screwed the top on before gluing in order to align the head, so when closed it faced forward. The added benefit to the Hitty was that now she could swivel her head and move her arms independently.

My Perfume Hitty has one arm that is longer than the other. Others have torsos of different lengths. What could account for the differences in these dolls?

I did not maintain strict tolerances of size. There seemed to be quite a variety of Hitty sizes and colors. Although the original doll was 6.25 inches, it did not seem to be a requirement. The size was a factor in the Collector's Set of course, but not for my other Hittys.

Other Hitty Dolls

Did you give a prototype doll to Rosemarie Ionker of Boneka Doll Fashions? She sent me a picture of her doll. It looks as though the facial features have been sanded off.

Yes. I had chosen a fabric that was similar but not identical to the dress depicted in the book. I sent this to Rosemarie so she could make the clothes for the 1,000-piece Hitty Collector's edition. The Hitty with the sanded-off face was the mannequin she used to design the clothes. She did a wonderful job, and I was lucky to have her do it. Unfortunately, as you know, we had to cut the production short, and she was never able to complete it.



Prototype Stockbridge Hitty, courtesy of Rosemarie Ionker



Secret Keeper Hitty, courtesy of Eve H.

Do you remember the “Secret Keeper Hitty”?

The Secret Keeper was the same as the Perfume Hitty, except there was no applicator in the tube. It was empty except for a rolled-up piece of paper that someone could write on and hide inside the Hitty. Grandma could write a message, i.e., “Happy 9th Birthday. Love You, Grandma.” Then in the future, imagine what it would have been like if the person who had initially received the Secret Keeper gave this Hitty to her own daughter on her 9th birthday. Just like a time capsule.

I have seen photos of your Hittys with light, medium and dark skin colors. Did you use different colors of resin for casting them?

A variation of colors was also acceptable in a Hitty. Especially in the carved wood Hittys, because a lot of the influence of the color was determined by the type of wood used. When I found a color that people liked, I did more of them: like “Peaches and Cream” and “Golden” Hittys. I made some black Hittys, too.

Did the “Peaches and Cream” and “Golden” dolls also have a cavity in the body, or was it a solid torso?

The Hittys were hollowed out if I needed to put in a container, whether it was a Perfume Hitty or a Secret Keeper. Otherwise, they were left solid.

Did you keep a record of how many resin Hitty dolls you have made?

No, I never kept a record of how many cast Hittys I sold.

Are you still making any resin Hitty dolls?

I am not currently making any cast Hittys assembled or in kits.



Wooden portrait of Michael Langton's father

Wooden Doll-Making

What other wooden dolls besides Hitty and Elmer have you carved?

This is a portrait of my father. It was carved in the late 1980s. It is carved wood (pine head and hands, walnut wheels, pine hat and carved pine fabric for the chair). It was done for a show in New York. The piece was way too personal for me, so I never sold it.

Did you make any resin copies of your wooden dolls?

The only carved wooden doll that I made a mold of was a Wizard. I made silicone molds and cast the pieces in wax. This led me to using the resin in future cast editions.

What were the patents for doll body construction that you received?

I was working on a production of cast resin figure skaters. They had a moveable spine that I put in the molds and cast foam around it. The foam looked like it was part of the costume. The neck, arms, shoulders and hips moved. The right skate had pins sticking out that were inserted into holes that were drilled into

the ice base. From this secure mounting the doll was able to be put in many skating postures.

My idea was to work out agreements with the skaters and do editions of them wearing the outfits that they won competitions with, i.e., Dorothy Hamill (Gold Medal winner in the winter Olympics in 1976). That way kids could start a collection of their favorite skaters. This doll body was one of the patents I received. I met with designers from Mattel. I wanted to sell the patent for their Barbie doll and make millions of dollars. My hopes shattered when it proved to be too expensive to manufacture for the Barbie market. Good thing I didn't write any checks drawn on my expected success.

Can you tell me about winning the Doll of the Year (DOTY) award?

Winning the DOTY Award helped me establish a level of credibility in the doll world. I used this in my marketing plan to further convince people of the value and uniqueness of my work. These were Art Dolls that had never been done before. They were exclusively my creation. That's the good news. However, no one was sitting around the kitchen table asking, "Is anybody carving articulated dolls out of wood, and where can we find that person?" I needed and relished any opportunity to let people know that the work was being done and being done by me. This award helped me do that.

It was important that the work be accepted as ART. When you are trying to sell your work, it is necessary for the work to be designated as ART rather than CRAFT. A piece sold in the art market could sell for 10 times as much as art rather than as a craft. Because I was making one-of-a-kind pieces, it was necessary that I find a way to sell the dolls as art. One way I did this was to never show my work in a craft show, only art shows. Once you have established a reputation as an artist, then you can do craft shows, but I have never met anyone that developed a reputation in the craft world that was able to migrate into the art world and enjoy the financial benefits available there. This was my mindset during this time period of my work.

Are you still carving now?

There are pieces I started and never finished. I work on these. They deserve to be finished. When I was in college, I started carving a chess set based on the characters from *The Lord of the Rings*. One side was carved Maple and the other side was carved Black Walnut. Maple is a hard wood to carve. I started it when I was 22. I'm 75 now. Long time to finish a project.

What would you say to anyone wanting to be a woodcarver?

It would have to support your passion, because you will probably not make any money at it.

Thank you, Michael, for answering my questions!