

## Sooners Gary & Jean Clinton of United Design Corporation

# The Art of Success

**G**ary and Jean Clinton have turned an OU art education into what their catalogue calls "Art from the Heart."

Aided by a staff of designers and sculptors, the Clintons produce sculpted figurines as whimsical as dancing mice and as uncommon as pigs with wings. They have conjured up nostalgic miniatures of old-timey "Main Street" buildings and thoughtful reproductions of European castles, freshly-hatched dinosaur babies and tortoises so finely detailed and carefully painted that their sculpted hydrostone exteriors seem to twitch.

But the Clintons' biggest and most impressive "sculpture" easily dwarfs these one-to-ten-inch-high treats. It is huge—28,000 square feet here, 25,000 square feet there, and another 88,000 under construction.

This "sculpture" is in fact an international, multi-million-dollar business. The Clintons have titled their mammoth creative effort "United Design Corporation."

If United Design *were* a sculpture, it would have to be classified as "kinet-

ic." The people who work at the factory move fast, producing more than 12,000 finished pieces in a single working day from any of approximately 1,000 different gift-item designs. In sales terms, these products move like crazy. The Clintons confidently expect to sell nearly \$15 million worth of them this year through vendors in all 50 states and a half-dozen foreign countries.

Gary and Jean have poured their creative energies into "sculpting" this company since 1973. Over the years, it took on a number of odd shapes — such as a home-fired pottery kiln in a jerry-rigged chicken coop—before bal-

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By MICHAEL WATERS

“We set up our booth, took all this pottery we’d made . . . we sold over \$300 worth . . . I thought, ‘People actually buy this stuff!’ ”

looning into its present size on an isolated spread in Noble, roughly 10 minutes south of the OU campus.

Their 15-year adventure began at a shopping mall crafts show.

“Right up until 30 days before I got my degree, my intention was to teach at college level,” says Gary Clinton. The degree was an M.F.A. in ceramic design from OU, which he believed would allow him to make a living in an “intellectually challenging” classroom environment while giving him the freedom for studio art on the side.

But the more he thought about it, the less sure he was about settling on a teaching career. Unlike many students in similar circumstances, however, he had an alternative.

Two years earlier, in 1973, Gary and his wife, Jean, had seen an advertisement in an Oklahoma City newspaper for a crafts show at Shepherd Mall. They both had studied ceramic design at OU, and Gary had just completed a bachelor’s degree in art education. While he looked for a teaching job, Jean was working part-time at a day-

care center. The crafts show struck them as a small-time money-making opportunity.

“We’d never done this before, and it was \$15 for a booth space,” Gary recalls. “We paid our money, set up our booth and took all this pottery we’d made at the School of Art. We sold over \$300 worth, and I was just amazed. I thought, ‘People actually buy this stuff!’ We’d been making these things for so long . . .”

The revelation influenced both their work patterns right off the bat. “We took half the \$300 and made a down payment on two pottery kilns, which we moved and rebuilt in an orchard next to our house. Then we ran electricity to a deserted chicken coop in our back yard and turned it into a studio.”

Jean quit her day-care job and went into pottery-making full-time. Stymied by the state of the job market, Gary pursued his master’s degree, and together the couple depended on sales of pottery at crafts fairs and retail stores for their income.

Gary is quick to credit Jean for

being at the core of the business. “Jeannie worked full-time at pottery . . . really, she kind of started the business in that it was her driving force and her full-time work behind it.”

In the first few years, the company changed not only in shape but also in name — from Earthworks Pottery to Golden Age Pottery. In 1977 the business was incorporated. An important turning point had occurred in 1976, when the Clintons traveled to the World Trade Center in Dallas to attend an annual gifts show. From talking with exhibitors and businessmen, the couple learned how the market system worked. They attended bigger shows in market halls and hired sales representatives. Then they learned about hydrostone, a hardened substance mined in northern Oklahoma and southern Kansas. Before long they had partially forsaken pottery in favor of a cold-cast process using hydrostone.

Within five years of that first Shepherd Mall crafts show, Gary and Jean had shaped a business that employed more than 20 people, sold \$130,000 worth of merchandise a year and required the bulk of a 12,000-square-foot facility leased on OU’s south campus. The company’s momentum took a hit from a 1979 fire, which destroyed much of the south campus building. In its wake, the Clintons decided to forgo pottery entirely for figurine-making, changed the name of the business to United Design and began building on the northwest Noble site.

There were problems of a different kind along the way. After working for a while in the chicken-coop studio, Jean says, “We had to move out of the house and get an apartment because the business was taking up so much of the place.”

More than once, the Clintons have found themselves in the position of having too much business and not enough storage space for their product.

Today United Design’s factory operates in a colorless, concrete two-story building on a secluded acreage. Its



Sculptor Larry Miller, right, an OU art graduate, and United Design’s president Gary Clinton study a design for a new addition to the firm’s Santa Claus line.

name is bashfully imprinted in tiny white letters on the glass of the front door. There is an overcrowded parking lot and a construction crew working nearby. There also is the sense of great haste that you might expect from a company trying to cope with an average annual sales growth rate of approximately 43 percent.

Inside the factory, 230 employees hand-make and package the product. They represent nearly half of the people United Design employs in one way or another. In addition to the factory workers, a number of persons carry on part-time cottage industry jobs, such as decoration. Also, Gary and Jean employ a half-dozen sculptors and designers, plus 150 sales representatives who cover all 50 states and a number of foreign countries.

But the factory is where the designs become reality, where a winged pig (and almost anything else) can be produced in roughly three days. The process begins with pouring material into a latex or silicone production mold. Hydrostone pieces are poured from latex molds and dry in 10 to 15 minutes. (About one-third of the figurines are made of bonded porcelain, a slightly tougher material.) The chalk-white pigs then are taken to the fettling department, where employees use dentist drills to take out air bubbles and other imperfections. Next, in the production area, they are painted and decorated with eyes and other features. A coating of liquid resin known as "zill" gives a touch of gloss to their noses, and the pieces are dried at 120 degrees in a small drying chamber. Finally, before leaving the building, all products get a "Made in USA" sticker.

To those who work here every weekday, it is a business. But to the visitor, the sights are something akin to what you might expect to find in Gepetto's workshop.

A woman sits coolly at a table, a bright light at one shoulder. She attaches beady black eyes, one after another, to a hundred tiny and visionless basset hounds, giving them not only sight but their comical soul. One group of employees puts color into the cheeks of a half-dozen Santa Clauses — not to mention the colors of his suit and sack. Nearby, on a wheeled cart loaded with carrying trays, several



*Jean Clinton, right, discusses the models for a new series of United Design figurines, "Teddy's Neighborhood," with one of the sculptors, Donna Kennicutt.*



*In the production department in Noble, a limited-edition Santa Claus is set on a turntable for easy handling as red paint is painstakingly added to his suit.*

rows of half-finished unglossed teddy bear figures stand stiffly — like a brigade awaiting orders to march.

Overall, the place is filled with these "Stone Critters," "Itty Bitty Critters," "Backyard Birds," "Animal Classics" and many more. Jean says the company's daily production is enough to fill an entire UPS van.

The "Stone Critters" are United Design's oldest line, a menagerie of 200 types of cats, pigs, dogs, Easter bun-

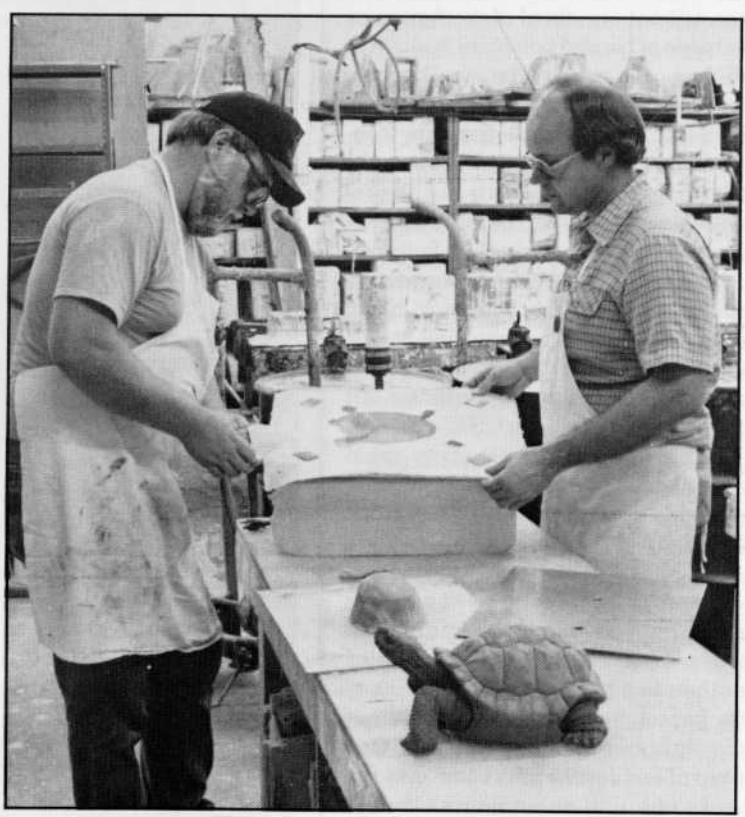
nies, teddy bears, zoo animals, woodland creatures and dinosaurs. To its more than 1,000 different types of pieces, United Design adds about three new product lines each year.

One of the company's biggest changes in the 1980s has been the hiring of outside talent to create and design new figurines. Since 1982, Gary and Jean have acquired four full-time sculptors, a production artist and two art directors. Among this number are

# UNITED DESIGN

Gary recalls OU's emphasis on creativity. "They concentrated on getting you to understand how the creative process would work for you."

*Suzan Bradford, another sculptor/designer who was trained at OU, puts the finishing touches on a new Santa Claus as Gary Clinton looks on.*

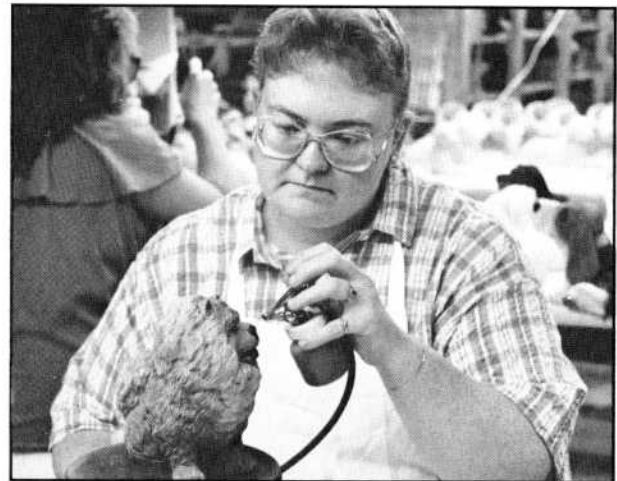
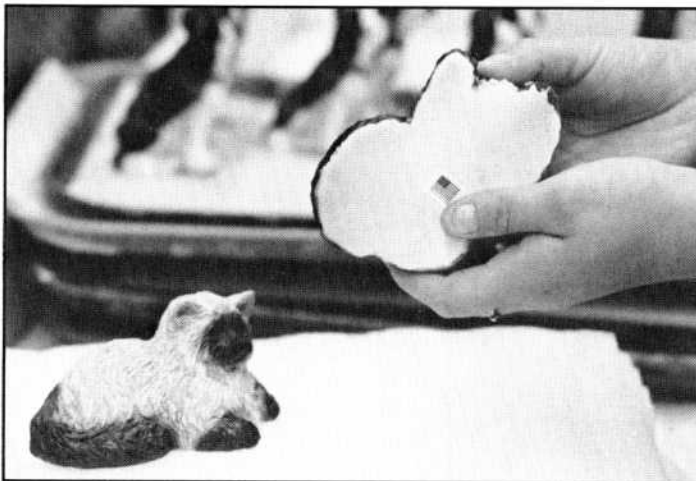


*In the fettling area at the Noble plant, a trayful of hydrostone dogs, bunnies and teddy bears await a check for air bubbles and any other imperfections.*

*The process of producing each figurine, which takes approximately three days, begins with the pouring of the hydrostone or bonded porcelain material into a latex or silicone production mold.*



*When packed for shipping in distinctive United Design boxes, the daily output of the skillfully sculpted figurines will fill an entire UPS van.*



*Before leaving for the 50 states and a dozen foreign countries, each United Design product receives a "Made in U.S.A." sticker.*

*A Pekingese member of the company's oldest line, the "Stone Critters," gets a hand-sprayed coat of paint.*

OU alumni John Goodell, a nationally-known illustrator, and his wife, Gayla Goodell, a former art director for McGraw-Hill. Other OU-educated personnel working at United Design's studio include sculptors Suzan Bradford, Larry Miller and Ken Mennoli.

Of the "major-league people" the company uses for creative tasks, Gary adds that "many of them are OU art department graduates . . . They're the very best, and we can work with them easily."

Gary Clinton counts off the places where the company's next bunch of sheepdogs, spotted cows or brontosaurus refrigerator magnets might be purchased. "We have very strong distributors right now in England . . . Spain . . . Holland . . . West Germany . . . we have two distributors in Japan who are doing some business

and a very strong distributor in Canada. In Canada they sell more of our products per capita than we do here in the U.S."

That kind of success in business can be as much a product of an M.F.A. as an M.B.A., according to Gary. He lauds his art education for giving him a two-word philosophy he finds indispensable in running a big business: "Be creative."

"I credit the School of Art for giving me something that I think no other area of education at OU could possibly give somebody . . . it really forced me to learn how to come up with creative solutions," he says. "It's not just in art and design, but in all areas of our business."

Gary recalls that the emphasis on creativity at OU during his studies was almost total, "something that was

emphasized almost to the exclusion of all else. It was just the nature of the way the school was structured . . . Some art schools concentrate more on craftsmanship, execution or technique and then hope the creative spark will hit you like a bolt of lightning. But at OU they really concentrated on getting you to understand how the creative process would work for you. It made you come up with new ideas and new designs, things that were unique and important to you, and then it made you analyze *why* it was important to you."

With all the changes at the company since its chicken-coop days, the Clintons still keep their fingers in the creative process. While president, Gary still retains the title and responsibilities of "creative director." Jean, the vice president, still serves as "prod-

While contemplating a new line of their own music-box figurines, the Clintons already are discussing another phase of building expansion.



*Sculptor Ken Mennoli, an OU graduate, designs a new "Stone Critter" dog.*



*United Design turned to the University School of Art alumni list for its art directors, John Goodell, in the top photo working on a promotional illustration for a new product line, and his wife Gayla Goodell, bottom photo, designing the boxes to house the inhabitants of "Teddy's Neighborhood." John is nationally known as an illustrator, while Gayla was formerly art director for McGraw-Hill.*

uct manager," overseeing all aspects of the finished work.

At the company's cramped design studio in Norman, Gary tinkers with a music box and contemplates what United Design could do with a line of its own music-box figurines. He is already talking about another phase of building expansion.

"I think of my creative input in the business more like building a sculpture, you know, building a whole business as if it were a sculpture, rather than thinking of the individual things we make as works of art," he says. "I think Jeannie feels the same way."

Gary and Jean still are "sculpting" United Design. However, the company already boasts a number of well-chiseled features. It has doubled its size in approximately two years. It offers creative satisfaction to a coterie of artists and craftspeople. It produces hundreds of jobs for Oklahomans in an economically depressed climate. It provides wealth and fulfillment for its co-founders. It leaves traces of their ingenuity in the shops and homes of everyday people on three continents.

For a sculpture, that ain't bad. 