

## HOW TO MAKE IT AS... A SCULPTOR

Julie Wilson, 57, is an animal sculptor who works out of her home studio and gallery in Great Easton

**DREW** an awful lot when I was little. There was this art programme on TV called the Tingha and Tucker Club, about two koalas. My mum entered a picture of a parrot I'd done into one of their competitions and I should have won, but they didn't believe I'd painted it.

I was seven. They gave me a "highly commended" but I was a bit peeved my mum didn't push it.

I've always been interested in art. I had an absolutely fantastic art teacher at the Collegiate Girls' School in Leicester called Ian Walker. He took us to Loughborough College of Art and Design when I was about 16 and that's when I decided it was the course for me.

It's funny, because I took an A-level in art and failed, but it never held me back. You think it's the worst thing at the time but later on you realise it really doesn't matter. It's what you do after school that counts.

I still gained a place at Loughborough and took the foundation course.

I remember going into the ceramics department and throwing a pot, which really enthralled me. I was always good at anything to do with 3D.

To start with, I wanted to be an interior designer. A friend of mine was studying fashion and I realised I liked that. I just wanted to do the more practical side of it like pattern cutting. I knew I didn't want to be a designer. So I stayed on at Loughborough – much to my tutors' disgust. They wanted me to do a degree but I fancied the City and Guilds course in tailoring.

It was hard work, 9am to 5pm, five days-a-week, plus two evening classes – not at all what the degree students were doing.

Those on the BA looked down on the college diploma students but it didn't bother me. I won two national menswear awards for my designs, from IMBEX and the Leather Institute. I then went on to finish my final year and gain a college diploma.

You didn't always get a job straight out of college, particularly in manufacturing, but I was lucky and worked for Courtaulds at Wolsey, in Shepshed, cutting and sewing knitwear. I was made redundant after four months, but taken on by Rob Roy Children's Wear and went on to become their sole contract designer, working my way up to head designer and then consultant.

It was an interesting job – we did a lot of work for Marks and Spencer – and all baby-wear. Babygros with poppers were quite the new thing at the time.



**'YOU NEED TO HAVE PATIENCE AND AN EYE FOR DETAIL': Julie Wilson in her studio, and some of her creations**  
PICTURES: MIKE SEWELL



# Fancy carving out a career as a sculptor? Have a go, you've got nothing to lose

Before, during and after having a family, I had various designer roles with companies around Leicestershire, but it wasn't until my third child was two-and-a-half that I joined a pottery group at Uppingham Community College. I took the pottery course and spent three enjoyable years there, learning my craft.

I discovered I had a talent for sculpting animals. Everyone else made bowls, but my first piece was a cockerel. It's a bit pathetic looking, but I've still got it.

I basically taught myself. Over the years I've asked many artists many questions, but I've never been on any further courses. I'd like to think I have a natural talent.

I did spend some time with an amazing artist over in Barrowden called Tessa Pullan, who sculpts animals in bronze. She pointed me in the right direction.

I work in coarse stoneware clay and use slab-building techniques. The clay is perfect as it has a lot of grog in it, which allows my work to be highly detailed, textured and very natural. It's very strong and has a good background colour, and I use oxides and ceramic pigments to emphasise this.

I used to work out of the kitchen, but that

wasn't very practical with kids. Where we live now there are some out-buildings and we've converted one into my own studio with kiln and gallery space. I have a lot of stock and it seemed the natural thing to display my work for people to see.

All artists have good days and bad, but on a good one you can get so carried away you forget what time it is. Now my lot have all grown up and flown the nest I can be out there and please myself. It's great having that freedom.

I sell through a number of local galleries, including the Old House Gallery in Oakham and Croft Wingate in Market Harborough. I remember the first time I took a piece into Dick at the Old House and he laughed, saying: "Come back when you get better."

At that time, there was another gallery in Uppingham called the Magpie Gallery and I knew someone who worked there. Quite bravely I asked if they'd look at my work and they ended up taking three animals for their annual cattle market window display.

I enjoy making my sculptures the most – there's nothing more exciting than starting a new piece – but I don't really like selling them,

which is why I tend to sell through galleries. I do show my work more and more these days, including the Burghley Horse Trials and the Birdfair at Rutland Water, and I take part in the Rutland Open Studios.

People see what I do and that's how I tend to pick up commissions – mostly of people's dogs. I've always liked animals – and faces. I have this thing about people's and dogs' faces. I think it's the eyes. That's why my pieces are very realistic.

Some people tend to specialise in a certain group of animals but I like to have a go at anything. I sculpt mostly from photographs, but can be inspired by documentaries, holidays, pictures in magazines and the sheer variety of animals we have around us.

In recent years, I've been working closely with the David Sheppard Wildlife Foundation, which is heavily involved in African wildlife conservation. For the past two years I've had pieces accepted for their Wildlife Artist of the Year competition at the Mall Galleries in London.

It's important to be able to network and get your work out there.

I don't want to be so successful that I have

little time to do what I love doing and struggle to supply; that's why I limit myself to seven galleries across country.

I work most days – it's certainly not a Monday-to-Friday job. As an artist, in some ways you're always working, but it doesn't feel like a hardship when it's a hobby you've developed and enjoy. I just try not to let it take over, otherwise you lose that enjoyment and it would show in my sculptures.

You need to have patience and an eye for detail in this work and, of course, a genuine interest in animals. The time each piece takes to craft depends on what it is, but a commission can take as long as 10 hours.

My advice for fledgling artists would be to just have a go – you've nothing to lose.

The nice thing about being an artist is that you don't have to retire. I don't have any great aspirations, but I do want people to enjoy and appreciate what I do – particularly my fellow artists.

I would like to win the Wildlife Artist of the Year – and you never know, one day it might happen – but getting to see my work in the Mall Gallery is a fantastic achievement.

www.juliewilsonsculptures.com

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### JULIE'S FACTFILE

#### QUALIFICATIONS

**1975-79:** Foundation course in art, City and Guilds in tailoring, College Diploma in art; Loughborough College of Art and Design.

**1993-1996:** Pottery course and classes at Uppingham Community College.

#### CAREER

**1979:** Cutting and sewing knitwear; Wolsey, Leicestershire

**1980-85:** Contract designer, head designer and consultant; Rob Roy Children's Wear, Leicestershire

**1996 to the present:** Animal sculptor