



I never liked dolls much,” Maureen Russell says. Instead, the senior conservator for the state of New Mexico expresses a fondness for marionettes and puppets, which she says she loves and are “more fun.” In fact, she has a collection of her own marionettes.

She saw her first puppets when as a child living in France, her parents would take her to England at Christmas to see puppets. After getting a BFA (1972) and an MFA (1974) from Penn State, she eventually became a conservator for the state of New Mexico and has most recently repaired several hand-carved puppets by Gustave Baumann. The Baumann puppets are on display at the New Mexico Museum of Fine Arts in Santa Fe.

Conservators are a small group with a national organization and a code of ethics, which members, among them Russell, must sign off on yearly. One demand of the American Institute of Conservation is that members who have new information must publish and Russell has a list of publications, presentations and exhibitions that would merit appointment as a full professor.

Conservators are, the AIC says, “individuals with extensive training and special expertise” who aim to preserve “cultural property,” which “consists of individual objects, structures, or aggregate collections. It is material which has significance that may be artistic, historical, scientific, religious, or social, and it is an invaluable and irreplaceable legacy that must be preserved for future generations.”

Before arriving in New Mexico three years ago, Russell worked in a variety of jobs, sometimes as a restorer and airbrush specialist. She's worked for the National Carousel Society, taught at the Smithsonian Institution, then worked for galleries and foundations in Palm Beach, Miami, Washington, New York, Cambridge, Boston, Los Angeles, with a month as a visiting scholar in Guatemala.

In her current job, she does everything. "It's not just working with your hands," she says. It's teaching, outreach, working with the seven monuments and eight museums. She oversees interns and helps establish protocols for exhibitions. Because collections have acclimated to New Mexico's old buildings and 10 percent humidity, "one of the jobs a conservator has is to make sure the collection is maintained safely wherever they go."

The parents who took her to London are retired Marine Colonel Gerald F. Russell and his late wife, Eileen. When Col. Russell retired from the Marine Corps, he joined the staff at Penn State and Maureen eventually became a student there, transferring from a small college in Philadelphia.

She speaks fondly of her days at Penn State and today her Volkswagen's license plate holder declares: NITTANY LIONS/PENN STATE UNIVERSITY. Ask her to talk about some of her best memories of Penn State and she mentions "People's Nation" on South Allen Street, a 1960s mini-mall, now the home of the Rapid Transit, and then lists some of her favorite professors beginning with Bruce Shobaken, Harold Altman, Marc Hessel, George Zoretich ("What a lovely man."), Stuart Frost, Bill Hansen and Lanny Sommese, then an instructor and now a full professor.

"They were trying things like not grading at the time," Russell says of her time, 1968-1974. "I don't know; it was a different time."

But that doesn't mean they weren't demanding. She recalls a series of nights trying to produce a portfolio of prints for Shobaken and hanging them on a clothesline "with print after print in different colors ... just wanting it to be so good for him," and Shobaken looking at the work one day and saying nothing. Students all knew. "Just reading his face," she sighs decades later.

She recalls that Shobaken and Altman had different teaching styles. Altman "could sit back and you needed to come to him. I did that, but it could be intimidating." She also says he "was a kind of tongue-in-cheek teacher. You had to get it out of him. But that was OK. It should be like that."

Then there was her photography instructor, Marc Hessel, who had "this farm as you were going out of town on the left-hand side painted bright cobalt blue." He raised big dogs, but she doesn't remember the breed.

"When you think about it," she says, "it was an amazing group of teachers."

Russell speaks of several amazing projects she's worked on, including early in her career when as an intern in Washington she assisted in the treatment of Charles Wilson Peale's "Portrait of George Washington," Pierre-August Renoir's "Luncheon of the Boating Party," and Claude Monet's "On the Beach."

More down to earth, she also worked for Josten's in State College—airbrushing from high school yearbooks "all the obscene little gestures young boys make."

"It was really a funny job," she recalls. "All day long."

R. Thomas Berner is a professor emeritus of journalism and American studies at the Pennsylvania State University and who now lives in Santa Fe. Berner discovered that Russell was his neighbor only when she sat down for an interview and asked him where he lived.