



The Trail of Painted Ponies (TOPP) is an American company that makes artisan collectibles. They began in 2001 by making works of art on life-sized horse sculptures across America. In 2003 they began creating small figurines that have since become beloved collectibles. They have a wonderful tradition of blending story with art as each of their figurines has a story behind it that is a part of the design. Artists from all around the world are invited to send in their design ideas which could be selected to become a TOPP figurine. This year The Trail of Painted ponies is celebrating its twentieth anniversary. Here is an interview with the TOPP director, Rod Barker about the inspiration behind The Trail of Painted Ponies and where they are today.

How did The Trail of Painted Ponies get started, and what was the inspiration behind it?

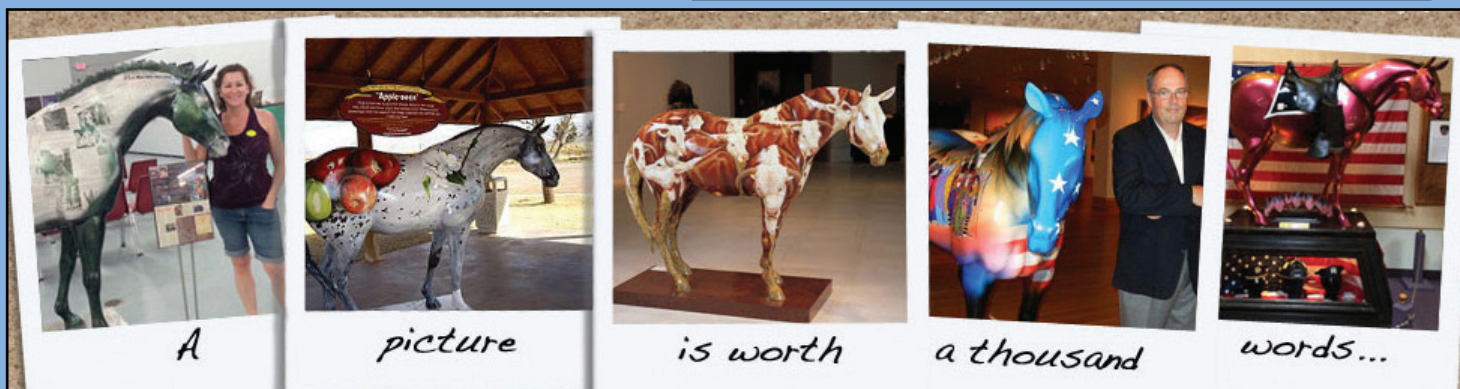
The idea for The Trail came to me in 2001. I was living in Santa Fe, NM at the time, working as a freelance writer, and was passing through Chicago while doing research for a book when I chanced upon Cow Parade - a philanthropic public art project where artists were invited to decorate life-sized fiberglass cows that were put on public display and then auctioned to raise money for various charities. I was impressed by what I saw as a fresh approach to bring art to the public while raising money for deserving non-profit groups. So, following the example of Cow Parade, which was organized by local businesses and an arts council, I tried to interest similar groups in New Mexico in mounting a similar project. When no one wanted to pursue the idea, I decided to put it on myself.



Above: Several TOPP figurines.

Below Right: The Trail of Painted Ponies are popular collectibles.

Bottom: Some of the original, life-sized Trail of Painted Ponies.





Above: The Trail of Painted Ponies figurines, Bear Medicine and Western Skies, both produced in 2022.

How did The Trail of Painted Ponies evolve from the Santa Fe art project?

To differentiate what we did in New Mexico from Chicago, we decided to change the form from a cow to a horse (a western icon); and instead of locating the project in a single city, to make it a statewide project. Then we invited Star York, a nationally acclaimed equine sculptor, to create an original, aesthetically pleasing horse form, and we made a point of attracting talented artists, especially Native American artists, from around the state to submit design ideas. Whereas the art for Cow Parade was primarily whimsical, we wanted to create a body of original artwork that would be taken seriously. When the project ended with an auction that raised close to a half-million dollars for various charities, we approached a gift-and-collectible company and negotiated a licensing arrangement which allowed them to manufacture and distribute miniature Painted Ponies figurines. Painted Ponies have since become the most popular horse collectible in America.

What is the meaning behind the name?

One hundred and twenty life-size Painted Ponies were created and they were exhibited at a variety of locations around the state of New Mexico. As a way of encouraging tourism and economic development, we decided to produce a map where Painted Ponies were on display, and invite visitors to experience New Mexico by taking a drive around the state to see the entire “herd” of Painted Ponies. The American West was first explored via trails, so it made sense to name the entire effort The Trail of Painted Ponies.

The fact that artists everywhere can submit artwork that could be chosen to become a Trail of Painted Ponies figurine is quite rare, where did the idea of involving artists come from?

Because we were committed to creating a new and different body of original artwork which expanded the idea of an artist’s canvas from a square that hangs on the wall to the dynamic form of a horse, it only made sense to broaden the project to include a variety of artists who would share their individual talents. To be able to say, “Every artist came out of the same starting gate, and crossed a different finish line,” was an intriguing concept. Based on the success of the New Mexico public art project, we expanded our invitation to artists around the country, and indeed the world.

Below: Artists from around the world can submit their designs by using the submission forms.



What do you look for in a design?

We look for designs that find a way to transform the horse form into something aesthetically unique. We like to say that each of the figurines we produce is a miniature work of art.

The design and the story of the figurine are so important, what brought about this connection between art and storytelling?

As a writer, I am a storyteller, and when it comes to art appreciation I have always felt that the inspiration behind a work of art is an important aspect of the art itself. Asking each artist to tell the story behind his or her Painted Pony gives it an added level to appreciate.



Left:
Paintado Pasado: a figurine inspired by the Spanish horse that were brought to America.

What is the process of crafting a Trail of Painted Ponies figurine?

The process begins with a detailed drawing created by an artist on one of our copyrighted horse forms. (We started out with just one form, a standing horse, but have since added a running, walking, turning and rearing form.) If we like the design and feel it will translate well into a 7" figurine, we ask the artist to create the design from different angles because ultimately it is going to be converted from two-dimensional sketch into a three-dimensional figurine. Working with a company that has a history in the collectible business and contacts with different factories in Southeast Asia, we determine if the design can be reproduced in a way that respects the integrity of the original design, for an affordable price. This actual production process involves the creation of a mold, the sculpting in clay by an artisan working from the design, and the final painting of the piece. Each step

along the way is taken with the artist's approval. And as a reward for their participation in this process, we pay every artist a stipend, give them a certain number of free castings, and allow them to purchase at wholesale for resale as many of their Ponies as they want.

This year marks the 20th anniversary of The Trail of Painted Ponies. How has it changed over the last 20 years, and how has it remained the same?

When the first Painted Ponies figurines were introduced at a trade show in Atlanta in 2003, we were thrilled at the enthusiastic reaction on the part of retailers, but were sure to keep our expectations in check. The gift-and-collectible industry is an unpredictable business, and quite frankly, we weren't sure how long we could continue to generate the special kind of artwork that would find a following among collectors. What has surprised and delighted us are two things. First, we had no idea how versatile the horse could be as a source of artistic inspiration. And secondly, we had no way of knowing how long the positive response from collectors would last. Twenty years later we continue to be amazed.

Below: *As well as creating figurines, The Trail of Painted Ponies creates mugs, ornaments, and snow globes from artists' designs.*



Left: The Trail of Painted Ponies' founder and president Rod Barker, celebrating 20 years.

Below: Lakota, inspired by the Lakota Native Americans; and Christmas Wonder, inspired by the magic of Christmas.



What was its greatest achievement?

I think the greatest achievement was described in an art magazine which said we had revolutionized the equine art field by demonstrating beautifully how the horse can not only be a subject for artists to paint, but a canvas where artists can let their imaginations run wild, creating a body of equine artwork that has no comparison. (This notion was seconded when the International Museum of the Horse in Lexington, Kentucky, hosted a tribute to The Trail of Painted Ponies in their art gallery.)

What does The Trail of Painted Ponies intend to do in the future?

Some of the imagery generated by The Trail is so evocative that we think it has the potential to be removed from the horse form and applied to other merchandise, such as apparel, fashion accessories and home decor. Licensing Painted Ponies imagery for use on other products than figurines will be a growing part of our future.

Special thanks to both Rod Barker for this interview and to Rikki Carter, the Director of The Trail of Painted Ponies, for all of her help!

Check out The Trail of Painted Ponies website to find out more info: trailofpaintedponies.com

And go to the official Trail of Painted Ponies shop to see all of their figurines, mugs, and snow globes: shop.trailofpaintedponies.com

If you would like to submit one of your designs, go to www.trailofpaintedponies.com/submit-designs.php to find out more.



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