Art Begins With Turkey Tails

Painting on feathers presents unusual challenge

By Debby Schoeningh

Artists are inspired by many different media. Heather Honeywell of Baker City has tried several.

Through the years, Heather has painted on paper, wood, metal saw blades, T-shirts, glass ornaments and clay, just to name a few. As her search continued for that perfect canvas to express her creative side, she eventually found it in nature’s plume: turkey feathers.

“I like the challenge of painting on feathers,” says Heather. “It’s totally different than other mediums I have tried. There seems to be very little room for mistakes.”

Each feather from the turkey’s elaborate tail of fanned-out quills becomes a work of art, as Heather paints on its delicate surface. To prepare the feathers, Heather sprays them with a clear coat of polyurethane. It remains invisible, but keeps the feather’s fine blades, called “barbs,” from separating.

Feathers are similar to human fingernails, once fully developed they become dead matter. The base of each feather is attached to the bird by muscles, which can move each feather individually. Once the feathers become worn and battered, the bird replaces them by molting once or twice a year, depending on the species.

Heather uses the colorful bronze, green and reddish tinted feathers of wild turkeys, which are supplied by the hunters in her family, including her dad, and by friends. Commercial turkeys are purposely bred to produce white feathers to avoid having the feather pigment discolor the turkey’s skin during dressing.

“Turkey feathers seem the best because of their size and shape,” says Heather. “I like to use the larger tail feathers for the artwork and use smaller, more downy feathers as decoration on the upper portion of the painted feather, covering the quill.”

Even though Heather has found her ideal canvas, her choice of paints has been an ongoing succession of trial and error.

“I first started using watercolors,” she says. “They have a very nice blending and correcting ability. Now I am experimenting with acrylics. Acrylics seem to have more presence and a bolder appearance.”

As Heather brushes the paint on, layering it over the rippled barbs of the feathers, her images gradually
come to life full of color, and with a unique texture you won't find on other surfaces. The paint becomes ingrained into the feather's pigment and looks as though it is a part of the feather, rather than an embellishment.

Linda Nelson, a friend, is an admirer of Heather's art. “She takes a lot of pride in her work, and it shows,” says Linda. “Painting on feathers wouldn’t be the easiest thing to do, but she has mastered it well.”

Heather displays the finished feathers in simple oak frames, which her husband, Todd, helps her make. She uses a single matt of neutral colors to enhance, rather than overwhelm, the art.

Each painting is signed with her insignia—a bright red print of her left hand. She says she doesn’t know why she started using that, especially since she is right-handed.

“It just seemed right,” she says.
Her moniker is “Double H Art,” which incorporates her initials.

Since feathers come from nature, it seems appropriate most of her paintings are of wildlife. Moose, bighorn sheep and deer grace the feathery backgrounds, but her favorites are bull elk and horses.

“I live and breathe horses,” says Heather. “I love riding and the ground work. I have two horses and my husband has two he is working with right now, so they keep us busy.”

As a photography buff, Heather takes her camera everywhere.

“Just ask my husband,” she says. “He thinks I take too many pictures!”

Heather also enjoys hiking into the high lakes and taking her two dogs for walks in her spare time from her work as an advertising and graphics designer at the Baker City Herald newspaper.

Heather says she has always enjoyed art. She minored in it at Eastern Oregon University, where she took many drawing, painting and design classes. She says she taught herself to paint on the somewhat challenging feathers.

“I started painting feathers after I noticed the idea in an art gallery,” says Heather, who aspires to have her own art gallery someday. “I'm getting better all the time, but I have a long way to go. My idea for the future would be to paint and draw full time as a career.”

Although Heather has an art room where she organizes her projects and “thinks a lot,” she prefers painting in the comfort of her living room.

Heather sells her feathers primarily through word-of-mouth, and hopes to gain more exposure in galleries, when opportunities arise. Framed and matted, the feathers sell for $85.

Heather paints any chance she gets, and at times, has painted up to six feathers a month. It takes 3 to 7 days to complete one feather painting.

If Heather's feathers tickle your fancy, she can be reached at (541) 523-0884.