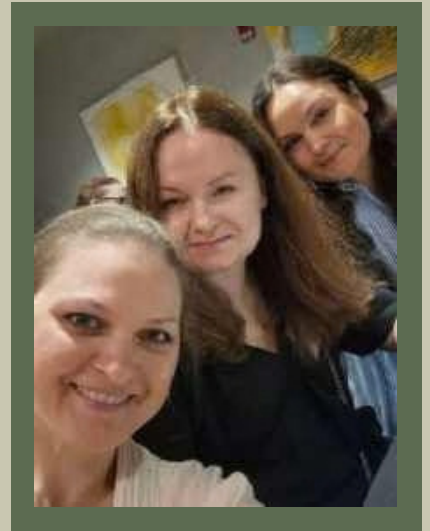


SEPTEMBER 2026

ISSUE 72

Three New Artists



IRINA ZHMURENKO, ELENA MISIUNA, MARIA
ASENOVA





Artists, Patrons, Associates and Friends,

I apologize for this being a few days late. It was an extremely busy week and there was so much to remember and gather together, I wanted to share as much as I could in a timely manner.

This conference was one of the best! We voted in three new artists: Maria Asenova, our first member from Bulgaria and Elena Misiuno and Irina Zhmurenko from Ukraine

Programs were dynamic and thought provoking; Stuart Holbrook discussed art dolls and the growing secondary market. He also emceed a panel of doll collectors and doll makers on their journeys, motivations and perspectives.

Judi Jetson shared how a small idea grew into a vibrant creative community.

We had an amazing live performance by Asha Daniels who portrayed an Appalachian woman inspired by the work of Ann Hord-Heatherley. Jimm Cox wrote and directed a play about her dolls as if they were real people and it was performed to a sold-out crowd in May. Ann persuaded Jimm to come to Asheville and share just a part of his show.

Leslie O'Leary spoke on the influence of fashion and pain in the life of Frida Kahlo. Sandra Oglesby shared the story behind the shape she infuses in each of her dolls and Ohdong Ryu presented the incredible history and costume design of Korean Hanbok. She shared how the shape and color and design distinguishes the levels of royalty as well as from commoners.

Asheville proved to be a welcoming city - the hotel was conducive to our needs and the energy among the attendees was palpable at every turn.

A huge thank you to Ann and Trish Hord-Heatherly who were the co-chairs of the conference and it was through Ann's connections around Asheville that made our Gallery Night remarkable.

Thanks also to Nadia Yukhanova, Anya Anderson and Ohdong Ryu for capturing so many photos throughout the event. We hope to have an announcement of the location for 2027 in the September NIADA ARTISTS NEWSLETTER.

On the next page, I wanted to share a post made by Maria Asenova on learning that she had passed her final stage toward becoming an artist member.

"I made it!! Late last night I received a long-awaited email! An email that I read several times because I couldn't believe it. I have successfully passed the last stage and am in the finals of joining NIADA - The National Institute of American Doll Artists !!! ❤️❤️❤️

Sometimes dreams seem so distant that you don't even dare to believe they can ever happen... For years I have been walking this road alone, with a lot of work, doubts, development and endless love for what I do. There were moments when this dream seemed so distant to me that I almost couldn't allow myself to say it out loud. Like something impossible.

This August 2026, I will be traveling to the USA where I will be presenting my work live during the NIADA conference in Asheville, North Carolina from August 27th to 29th.

In November 2025, I made a critique in Prague during Doll Prague which was the first step of the process. There I presented my work to artists from NIADA, I successfully passed and moved on. This was the first moment I allowed myself to believe that maybe I was really on the right path. I then went through the next stages (3 in total) of applying for and having my work evaluated by a US jury/board.

It's not just an organization.

Established in 1963, NIADA is one of the oldest and most prestigious organizations in the world, dedicated to the author's puppet as art. Founded to be handmade dollmaking a high art form, today it unites exceptionally selected artists from around the world. (NIADA - Dedicated to the Art of the Doll)

Membership is not just an application, it's a high recognition. This is the most prestigious level in the art world. The artists are selected through jury and vote, and the standards are extremely high.

And although today NIADA is an international organization with artists from countries such as the USA, France, Germany, Netherlands, Japan, Australia and others, so far there is no representative from Bulgaria and no representatives from Southeast Europe. The feeling is hard to describe....a mixture of excitement, fear, gratitude, and a feeling of arriving at a place that once felt like a utopia.

I came here alone. With years of work, with consistency and faith, even when I wasn't sure I would succeed. Whatever happens from now on is already part of a dream come true.

Thank you to everyone who is with me on this journey! ❤️ Maria Asenova"

And that, my friends, is why we are here.

Cindee Mayer

Gallery Night

We experienced a fantastic turnout for our Gallery Night and Sale in Asheville, and we owe much of that to our co-chairs, Ann and Trish Hord-Heatherley. Ann is involved with several guilds and artist groups, and it felt like they all came out to show their support! Throughout the evening, we enjoyed a continuous flow of guests, creating a wonderful atmosphere.

With twenty-five artists showcasing their work, the display was a stunning representation of artistic diversity.



NEW ARTIST
Maria Asenova



NEW ARTIST
Irina Zhmurenko



NEW ARTIST
Elena Misiuna



Tatiana Baeva



Leslie O'Leary



Ann Hord-Heatherley



Marlaine Verhelst



Pat Lillich



Meghan Lillich



Christine Benjamin



Karin Robinson



Anya Anderson



Cindee Moyer



Juliet Pelukh



Lesley Keeble



Diana Crosby



Deborah Pope



Sandra Oglesby



Larry Blount



Ima Naroditskaya



Nadia Yukhanova



Stephanie Blythe



Donna May Robinson



Ankie Daanen

Mountain Spirit....Peace Beyond the Storm

Created from debris of Hurricane Helene

*A tribute to the strength and endurance born into the mountain people
that was passed down from our ancestors and fortified us to survive any storm.
She stands atop the mountain in peace and gratitude as the sun rises on a new day....*



Sherry Housley

Keynote Speakers

Stuart Holbrook

Stuart Holbrook, the President and Chief Auctioneer of Theriault's online auctions, spoke about art dolls and the growing secondary market. As collectors age and pass away, their family members are looking for ways to sell these collections. He offered some interesting insights as well as recommendations to artists regarding the dimensions of the dolls they produce.



Laurel Breitkopf, Diana Rew, Ankie Daanen, Stephanie Blythe with Stuart Holbrook.

Following his presentation, Stuart led a panel comprised of two collectors and two artists on their journeys, motivations and perspectives on doll collecting and doll making.



Judi Jetson

Judi Jetson, a founding force behind Asheville's Local Cloth, shared her story of building an organization that has become a thriving home for fiber artists, fiber farmers and textile enthusiasts throughout Western North Carolina.

She shared how a small idea grew into a vibrant creative community through collaboration, persistence, and a shared commitment to the fiber arts.

Presentations

DOES ANYBODY HEAR US? JIMM COX WITH PERFORMANCE BY AHSHA DANIELS



Appalachian women find their voices. Play written & directed by Jimm Cox

Performance inspired by the work of visual artist Ann Hord-Heatherley



RESILIENCE AFTER HURRICANE HELENE - SHERRY HOUSLEY



ONE ARTIST'S SYMBOLIC EVOLUTION - SANDRA OGLESBY



WOVEN IDENTITY: FRIDA KAHLO - LESLIE O'LEARY



CULTURAL THREADS: EXPLORING KOREAN HANBOK - OHDONG RYU



Demos

At each conference, artists present valuable tips and techniques during our Demo sessions. Participants gather in groups to spend 20 minutes with each artist before rotating to the next, allowing you to learn from every one of them.



Leslie O'Leary
'Awakening the Cloth'



Sandra Oglesby
'Hair Today But No Mohair'



Karin Anderson
'Pyrography and Pencils'



Christine Shively Benjamin
'Reverse Applique Layering'

Souvenir Artists

Pat Lillich and Meghan Lillich



NIADA artists Pat Lillich and Meghan Lillich Pat and Meghan designed our souvenir doll in shown here at Gallery Night. Both artists Nomad Sculpt. The dolls were 3D printed, also taught a class on how to create a BJD hand-strung and hand painted. They created (ball jointed doll) at Academy LIVE! Thank five skin tones and several color ways of the you, thank you, thank you for all your time and dress. The skirt was designed so that you can and work to help make this conference add trims or ribbons to the hem to create your amazing own flapper!

If you have been reading these newsletters, you know that I am capable of screwing things up! I created the boxes for the souvenirs. There are stickers on the boxes because on the original design I had typed Asheville, Tennessee! After Ann received the boxes she texted me and said, 'You do know you're coming to North Carolina?'

So, I created stickers with the correct location and off to Staples I went. While I was explaining to Gracie what had happened, I noticed the error was also on the back side! She found some stickers to match the back of the box so we could cover up TN there.

On Thursday night of the conference, Nadia Yukhanova, Tatiana Baeva and Stephanie Blythe pitched in to help correct the problem. ~Cindee

NIADA's First Live Auction!

'You had to be there' is the only way to describe the humorous, yet persuasive way that Stuart Holbrook called our auction. Ten pieces were donated to raise money for NIADA. The dolls were all made by NIADA artists: E.J. Taylor, Juliet Pelukh, Akira Blount, Kate Church, Robert Tonner, Karin Otto-Burfict, Sandra Oglesby and Nancy Wiley.



NIADA artist Anya Anderson, lovely assistant to our dashing auctioneer, Stuart Holbrook, President of Theriaults, and holding one of the items up for auction.
We raised an incredible \$5,125 to support NIADA.



It was a battle to the end! :-)



Queen of the Helper Room

For many years, Christine Benjamin has led the Helper Room, managing a significant array of responsibilities. Her role includes soliciting donations, tracking contributions, setting displays, selling tickets, and drawing names to announce the winners of each item.

This year, we had a fantastic variety of items, making it quite challenging to determine where to place our tickets – many found themselves needing to buy more!

During the drawing, Marlaine Verhelst had all the new attendees sitting together at one table, and they collectively won over twenty items!

The Helpers generated \$1,710 toward the support of NIADA. Thank you so much to all who participated!



Christine Shively Benjamin



Marlaine Verhelst and her winning newbies!



Michelle Collins won one of Marlaine's dolls!
(I'm seeing a theme here!)

Chairish is the Word

2026 DOLL CHALLENGE



lynne buckson



karen robertson



dorann nelson



karin anderson



elizabeth klaiman
(*first doll she ever made)



sharrie wing



stephanie blythe



cindee moyer



deborah pope



pat lillich



alla lukianova



meghan lillich



ohdong ryu

NIADA *Academy* LIVE



Leslie O'Leary
Cloth & Clay: Bringing Faces to Life



Ankie Daanen
Make a Complete Doll



Deborah Pope
Hand-felted Animal
Head

Pat Lillich &
Meghan Lillich
Making Your Own BJD



Etc





New Artists!

Maria Asenova

BULGARIA

ELECTED TONIADA ARTIST MEMBERSHIP IN 2026



I was born, raised and educated in Lom, Bulgaria. From the age of six, my major focus was art.

Drawing, painting, and constructing occupied most of my childhood. I have always been interested in sewing, dollmaking, toys, puppets, and animation.

In 2005, after the birth of my child, I became interested in the art of dollmaking. It feels as if many of the different skills and interests I have developed over the years in relation to other artistic activities, have come together to serve me in this endeavor.

For me, dolls are not just objects; they are a part of the artist's soul. I believe they should carry a touch of magic, a fleeting sparkle, and take you back to childhood. They should, in some way, resemble illustrations from a children's book.







Elena Misiuna

UKRAINE

ELECTED TONIADA ARTIST MEMBERSHIP IN 2026



At first there was a search... a search for happiness, the meaning of life, harmony.

Since early childhood, I loved to sculpt and invent various devices. I invented cities and could play in an imaginary world. At school, I loved mathematics in all its manifestations, and my acquaintance with drawing and painting was given to me by lessons at an art school.

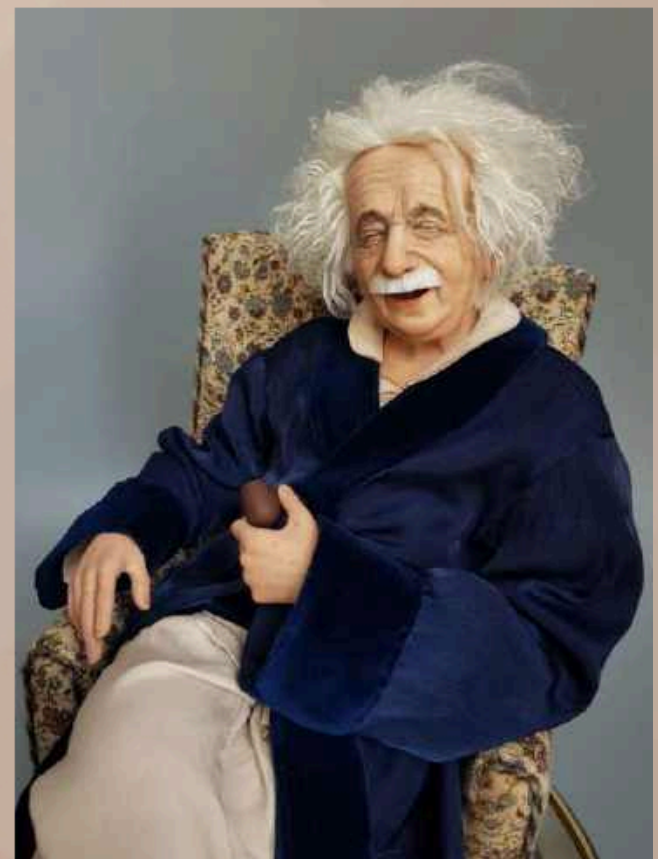
A technical mindset and a craving for art and beauty eventually led me to creating dolls. This happened completely unexpectedly, when I first came to a doll exhibition and could not live without trying to create something similar myself. I found that very cherished business, doing which I become happy and make other people happy.

Working on a doll combined all my knowledge and skills accumulated earlier. And a vast horizon for new insights opened up. Working on dolls combined invention, development of through collapsible structures, thinking drawings and frames, sculpture, working with color and searching for spiritual harmony. And most importantly, it is working on yourself and communicating with people who are on the same wavelength with you. And when the accumulated knowledge began to overwhelm me, then students appeared, whom I love very much and every time I prepare for classes with inspiration and great trepidation.

It is impossible to achieve the ideal, but the path to it is incredibly interesting! There is a lot of uncertainty, evil and sadness in life, but in my soul there lives an idea of beautiful and spiritually rich people and it is these images that I want to share with other people, to tell them how wonderful they are.







Irina Zhmurenko

UKRAINE

ELECTED TO NIADA ARTIST MEMBERSHIP IN 2026



When people ask me why dolls? I always answer that they combine everything I love and can do. Since childhood, I have been a very creative child. I was always drawing and making things. I studied at a children's art school and went to a handicraft studio.

My parents, and especially my grandmother, always supported me in this. It was she who taught me to tie a knot on a thread and sew clothes for my dolls. I remember the time spent with her with great warmth.

I have long since grown up and became a mother of three adult children, but at some point I realized how important it is for me to create exactly what can convey warmth and keep happy memories.

Dolls, for me, are like a bridge between generations, like a piece of kind and fabulous moments of life.

Every time I create a new work, I believe that at this moment our world becomes a little better.

I am an architect by training, and since 2010 I have been working as a doll artist. I create dolls and decor from porcelain. In my personal life, I am a mother of three grown children, an incorrigible romantic realist with a penchant for optimism! I will be glad if my work evokes positive emotions and touches your heart!









NADIA YUKHANOVA