

# HEART-FELT CREATIONS

Needle felting artist Tracy Laasch sculpts whimsical characters from wool fibers

BY REBECCA L. RHOADES



**For Phoenix-based artist** Tracy Laasch, everything fell into place when she discovered how much she could do with a bag of wool and a felting needle. “From the very first stab, I was literally hooked,” she says of the artistic medium that often is viewed as a craft but that she elevates into fine art.

The former consignment store owner and jewelry designer was scrolling through Instagram when she came across a post by a needle felting artist in the U.K.

“I had never heard of needle felting before, but I thought it looked kind of fun,” she says.

A quick trip to Hobby Lobby resulted in the purchase of kits to make a tiny mouse and rabbit. “It was fun and great. And I still have those little animals as a reminder,” she adds.

Felt is one of the world’s oldest textiles. Traditionally, wool fibers are wetted and then rolled, rubbed and beaten until they become permanently entangled, creating a high-performance fabric. Needle felting, on the other hand, uses a barbed needle to sculpt the fibers. This process allows the wool to be formed into detailed shapes.

“The needle has little barbs on it, sort of like a reverse fish-hook,” Laasch says. “The barbs grab the top layer of wool, binding it to the layer that’s underneath. The more you stab, the more it binds, eventually turning into felt.”

Laasch transforms shapeless batts of wool into whimsical 3D characters that come to life in endearing settings. A donkey dressed as a cowboy plays a harmonica while sitting in a pair of black leather horse stirrups. Mischievous rabbits use a vintage pencil sharpener to peel a carrot. A detailed octopus forms a one-man, eight-armed band, simultaneously playing four felt instruments while perched atop a genuine Gretsch snare drum.

Rabbits and donkeys make frequent appearances in Laasch’s work. “People love donkeys. Every time I make a donkey, it sells right away,” she says, adding that vintage treasures and thrift store finds often serve as inspiration for the final piece. “I look for items that I can incorporate into the sculpture. If I were a little animal and found this lying in a field, how would I use it? For example, I found these gorgeous vintage wooden tops, and I thought, ‘Oh, these are great. I’m going to put animals on top and they’re doing circus acts.’”

Laasch’s work can be found at On the Edge Gallery in Old Town Scottsdale, and, beginning this month, it will be showcased in Phoenix Zoo’s Savanna Gallery as part of the Art on the Wild Side program. She displays and sells her artwork during the annual Hidden in the Hills Artist Studio Tour. Her work can also be purchased on her website, [www.tracylaaschdesigns.com](http://www.tracylaaschdesigns.com).