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Art has Gone to the Dogs... and, uh, Barking Cats?

by Megan Graddy with photos by Bart Kasten

Twelve years ago, Ann Finley turned off the lights in her office, said goodbye to her coworkers, and made the drive home. As similar as this day was to so many others in her life, this one was monumentally different. After getting an M.Ed. and climbing the ladder in university administration, she was leaving her position and the comfort of her 9-to-5 job for a career as an artist.

Ann was now able to give her undivided attention to IronCraft Folk Art, which she refers to as “the hobby that ate my life.” This metal sculpture studio was based in her Decatur, Georgia, backyard. In her new role, each day presented the opportunity for her to imagine a new whimsical figure, and soon her angels, flowers, and series of other loveable animals found their way into hearts and homes across the country. With her sculptures on the covers of *Sundance* and *Eddie Bauer*, everyone (many admittedly in disbelief) celebrated that she had “made it.” She had successfully turned her hobby into a bill-paying career!

Though for Ann, it wasn’t enough. There was still something missing from her art—and she intended to find it. Instead of going big as she did in her previous transformation, Ann decided to downsize her torch and began making smaller, pendant-sized versions of her beloved sculptures. Her inherent talents won her a scholarship to study enameling at the Arrowmont School of Crafts (www.arrowmont.org). There, Ann found her new niche in the art world and dedicated her new name-sake business to handcrafting enamel jewelry.

Ann developed her own signature style by combining bold, unexpected color with simple shapes to create incredible statement pieces that demanded attention. She hit the road with her pendant necklaces, and as festival goers around the country began singing her praises, the collection grew to include

bracelets, rings, and earrings. Somewhere between the Decatur Arts Festival and the Ann Arbor Summer Art Fair, Ann had “made it” yet again.

However, just like the time before (and the time before that), Ann’s work continued to evolve. She struggled to unite her metalsmithing with the whimsical feel of IronCraft Folk Art. Ann spent countless hours at her jewelry bench working on her new pieces. Suddenly, the obvious became apparent and she had the idea for her next line. Inspiration came from her assistant. He had been there since the very beginning, sitting faithfully beside her at her workbench and always willing to pose for a sculpture. His name is Bruno—her dog.

For as long as Ann could remember, animals were her passion. If she could have rescued every stray she found, she would have. Her initial animal family included Bruno and his two cat pals, Jack and Squeaker, who came from a litter of five born in the scrap metal pile at her first studio. The three kept her sane when she was pulling all-nighters

in the studio and were always there to lovingly greet her when she came home from a long weekend away at a show. “I had always joked that if I could make jewelry for pets I would,” remembers Ann. “Then it dawned on me...I could make jewelry for people, like me, who love them so dearly.”

Ann went on to create Barking Cat Jewelry, a mixed-metal line of pendant necklaces hand-stamped with sayings like, “Sleeps with Dogs” and “Crazy Cat Lady.” Her necklaces epitomize what it means to be a pet owner and resonate with more people than she could have imagined. She soon realized that many of her enamel customers looking for a cool piece to wear out on the town were *also* dog or cat owners who couldn’t wait to talk about her four-legged friend. Barking Cat Jewelry soon expanded from a quirky side project to a full-fledged line of cat, dog, and horse pendants, rings, and



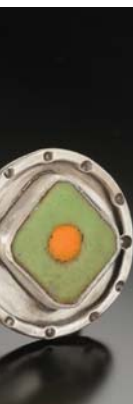
earrings. Not only do they feature irreverent sayings like, "Manure Happens," but also sentimental phrases like, "Rescue Mom" and "Who Rescued Who."

When Ann donated a piece to a local animal rescue group's silent auction, she was shocked when it sold for more than \$100. "If someone was willing to spend a hundred dollars on a necklace to benefit a rescue group, I figured I must be on to something," she said.

Ann now works closely with non-profit groups across the country, using her jewelry to help raise funds. She has created several different programs including creating custom pendants with organizations' slogans. Still, all pieces have an underlying purpose: when a necklace is sold, the non-profit group receives part of the proceeds. Plus, the necklace's rescue message becomes a conversation starter for the person wearing it, creating dialogue for pet adoption.

"I've finally landed my dream job," marvels Ann. "I get to spend my days creating jewelry while knowing that it ultimately helps to care for and assist homeless animals." TCR

Ann handcrafts both her Ann Finley Jewelry and Barking Cat Jewelry collections in her Decatur, Georgia, studio. Bruno still sits faithfully beside her. Jack and Squeaker have crossed over the rainbow bridge. However, Nemo, a one-off Russian Blue, has been added to the staff. For more information or to view the collections, visit: www.annfinley.com.

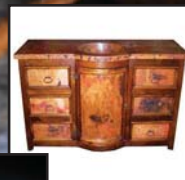


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