



*"Christmas embodies everything that inspires me as an artist and a person."*

*An interview with*

# Jim Shore

*by Allison Newman*

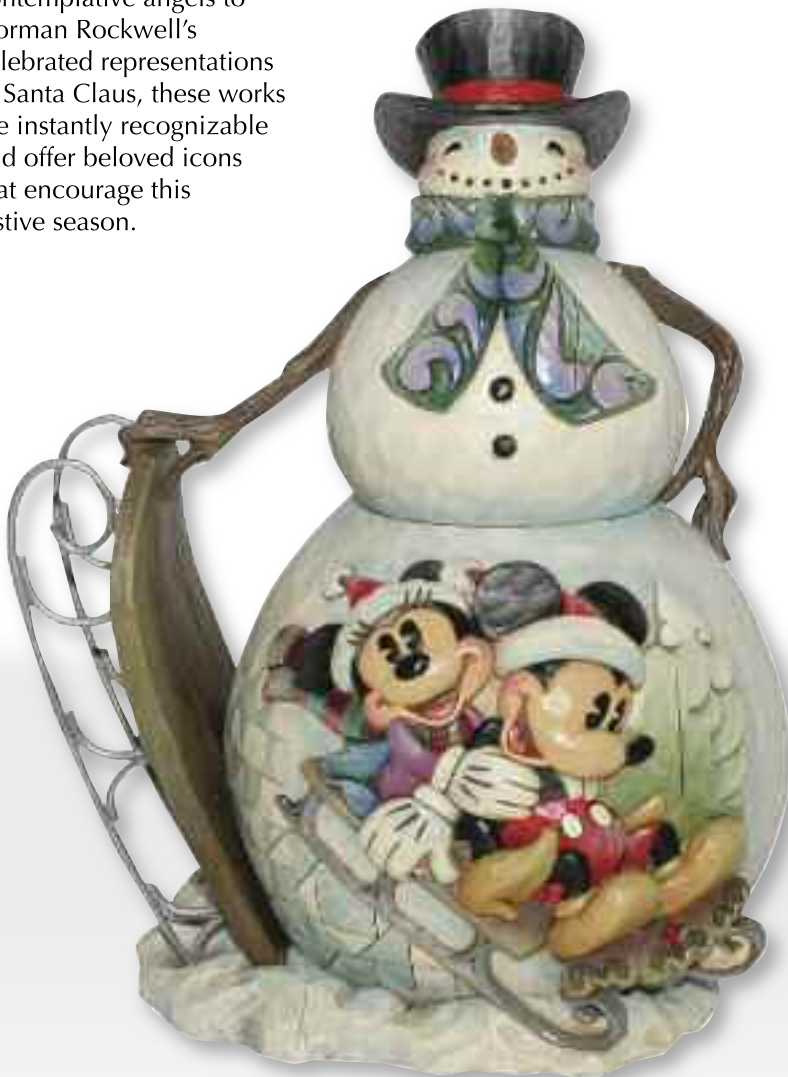
Christmas as a holiday elicits an amazing array of emotions: nostalgia, reverence, joy. As such it has become a theme in the work of many great artists, and these representations have edged their way into our collective imagination of this holiday. From Raphael's *Sistine Madonna* with its contemplative angels to Norman Rockwell's celebrated representations of Santa Claus, these works are instantly recognizable and offer beloved icons that encourage this festive season.

The work of Jim Shore is easily grouped in this pantheon of great holiday art, and in a way that feels uniquely American. He takes the lofty themes of the holiday like the Birth of the Magi and renders it in figures that feel both folksy and ageless. Similarly, he can take a

standard symbol of the season, a snowman, and offer it with a unique twist that allows you to look at a classic character in a new way. Jim explains his passion for creating Christmas figures, "Christmas embodies everything that inspires me as an artist and a person. I'm a Christian so to me it's the first chapter in the most important story ever told. Some of my best and most satisfying works are my Nativity sets. And of course the joy and wonder of Santa Claus makes him a great subject."

Probably the first thing that anyone notices about Jim's work is its utter originality. The motifs he uses, as well as the amazing color, are uniquely his. Jim starts with themes from traditional folk art, such as Angels or Santas. From there he adds unexpected flourishes and intricate details that transport them from simple subjects to works of art. "They're images I grew up with, that have a tradition and familiarity to most everyone," Jim says. "They're sort of our shared cultural history. To me that seems like the perfect starting place for folk art. Creating unique new interpretations [of these themes] challenges me as an artist and is something I love to do."

And the colors! A Santa in a deep red coat stands atop a pastel-colored pedestal; Mary, Jesus, and Joseph rendered in hues of blue; Jim's color palette knows no boundaries. With typical humility, Jim explains how he arrives at such exquisite color choices, "I never went to art school



and I don't have any formal training, so I guess I just don't know any better. My grandmother was one of the finest quilters I've ever seen. She wasn't afraid to put a green next to an orange next to a purple next to a pink. And it seemed to work for her. So I'm not doing anything avant-garde or cutting edge. Just what my grandmother taught me."

Jim's figures are some of the most popular home décor products on the market today. The reason for this may lie in the humanity and common touch that his pieces carry. Jim describes his work as "Heartcrafted," and this term seems to get at the essence of this. "There's an innocence in folk art, a simplicity of style and understanding of the world," he explains. "Most folk

artists aren't trained in any formal way. I certainly wasn't. So there isn't a lot of fancy theory or rules to follow. We create what we feel out of what we see. It's pure. It's heartfelt."

One Christmas figure that seems to capture both Jim's humanity and his unique perspective on his subject matter is called *The Real Meaning of Christmas*. This figure shows Santa kneeling in front of the baby Jesus. Through a cynical lens, the thought of this is shocking, but the artistry of the figurine carries a peacefulness that seamlessly unites these two otherwise conflicting symbols. Jim confesses that combining these two images was a challenge for him, but "It turned out to be one of my most successful pieces ever and a lesson

to me that different aspects of Christmas combined are what make it so special."

Jim sees the holidays as the perfect time for families to get together to explore the joys of creating heartcrafted art. "Most of our decorations are homemade to some degree. That's the way I grew up. That's something we carry on. It can be a lot of work but doing stuff together like that always gets us in the spirit of the season and it's worth it in the end." He explains that the basis of folk art is ordinary people trying to add beauty to their lives because that's what they love. When explained in such simple terms, it's hard not to consider all of our holiday preparations works of art! z

