

ALPACA CULTURE

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Máximo Laura

Renown textile artist

Suri Rugs

Luxury under foot

The Making of Moonlight

By Meyla Bianco Johnston

In the past, country life may have been simpler, but it also held more risk. Farmers had to rely on their wits, their animals and what they could grow in summer to get through the winter.

Naturally, monitoring the wind and weather was essential to agricultural planning.

This is how weather vanes began, as simple indicators. Over time, they evolved into works of art and distinctive farm mascots.

Traditional designs include jaunty horses pulling buggies, majestic Hereford bulls with rippling muscles and crowing roosters with spurs flaring. Americans have been relying on these sculptural works of art to tell them which way the wind blows since the beginning of this country's rural tradition.

As the number of alpaca farmers increases across the country, the list of tried and true weather vane designs now includes alpacas, both Huacayas and in this case, a very special Suri.

Suri & Company's Moonlight

Jackie King of Suri & Company at Fern Creek Farm is a new member of the alpaca community and a lifelong admirer of weather vanes. She considers them classic pieces of art for all to enjoy that add character and charm to a home or structure.



"The first weather vane that I can remember was a marvelous rabbit/hare weather vane on a gazebo along the cliff walk in Rhode Island," she says.

King wanted to replace the existing horse weather vane on her barn with an alpaca. She approached LizAnne and Ken Jensen, who own and operate West Coast Weather Vanes to commission a portrait weather vane depicting her champion Suri, Moonlight.

Why would a farm in Missouri use a company based all the way in central California's Santa Cruz Mountains to make the piece? King says, "West Coast Weather Vanes' web site was so detailed, from the photos to the explanation of the process and options, I knew they had the talent to take on my project."

"Not all weather vanes are made equal, but the weather vanes created by skilled artisans are considered art in my book, without a doubt," King says.

King and LizAnne corresponded and King sent photos of her Suri alpaca, Moonlight.

It takes a very special animal to inspire such a lasting work of art, plus, a handmade weather vane requires a substantial investment.

"I choose Moonlight," King says, "because she was the first alpaca I purchased and I think her conformation is the perfect representation of the Suri alpaca. She also has a lovely disposition."

West Coast Weather Vanes

The Jensens and their team at West Coast Weather Vanes create handmade copper weather vanes, which are treasured as family heirlooms. Not a common line of work, their involvement with weather vanes evolved quite naturally.

In 1988, they were honeymooning in New England when they happened to visit a copper weather vane shop in between leaf-viewing. Enthralled, they ordered a weather vane in the shape of a Viking Ship. "Ken's background is Danish and when he saw it, he really liked it," LizAnne says.

When the owner mentioned nobody in the Western U.S. was making them, their wheels started turning.

What began as a casual appreciation for copper

weather vanes now became a phase of intense weather vane research. They studied the history of weather vanes and step by step, created their first one, a humpback whale.

Today, thirty years later, they focus on working with clients to create meaningful pieces of enduring quality and beauty. In fact, their portfolio now includes more than 600 designs.

"We take great pride in what we do and try to make each weather vane to the best of our ability," LizAnne says. "This is especially true as we hope most of our weather vanes be around for a very long time. We want them to be a positive reflection of what we have done over the past thirty years of our lives. Many of our customers will send us photos of the weather vanes after they have been installed, sometimes years later."

"I think one of the things of which we are most proud of is the surprising number of our customers who have come back to us later and ordered another weather vane. Just yesterday, we got an order from a customer who first ordered a weather vane from us in 2001."



Right: Moonlight, the muse for the weather vane, is a lustrous, fawn female who was born in 2015. "Her dam is Moon Shadow, a terrific mom, and her sire is Silver Argento," Jackie King says. She won Judges' Choice at the 2017 Futurity and Supreme Champion at the 2017 AOA National Show. **Opposite:** Created by hand from 16 oz. sheet copper, this portrait weather vane was made by West Coast Weather Vanes.

PHOTOS COURTESY JACKIE KING / SURI & COMPANY AT FERN CREEK FARM



“We make each weather vane to individual order,” LizAnne says. “Even though we make limited editions of up to 50 weather vanes in each size, no two are ever exactly alike. We tailor each weather vane to our customers’ preferences. For example, on some of our animal weather vanes, our customers can specify gender. They can request a silky show coat or rougher field coat. Customers can also choose different metal combinations to match distinctive markings on their animal’s coat.

Their portrait weather vanes, such as the one they made for King of Moonlight, “require close consultation with our customers so we can make sure and get the details right,” LizAnne says.

“Different weather vanes require different gauges of copper,” LizAnne explains. “For Moonlight, we used 16 oz. copper. We also use lead-free silver solder.”

Our philosophy is that for most people, if they ever buy a weather vane at all, are only going to buy one in their lifetime so if we can make it personal for them, that makes it more fun and interesting for us, as well.”

“People commission weather vanes based on their passions. You never know what is coming next. I think

that as long as people have passions in their lives, there will be weather vanes for us to make.”

Luckily, the Jensens have many skilled artisans at their disposal who can make such a wide variety of subjects come to life. Their employees are dedicated to mastery of the technical skill it takes to make enduringly beautiful weather vanes.

“Our weather vane makers have worked with us for a long time,” LizAnne says. “Thomas, our Shop Master, has been with us for 26 years. Our junior-most employee has been with us for more than 12 years. Each weather vane maker in our studio makes a weather vane from start to finish. They also sign their work and take great pride in a job well done. Copper weather vanes can last a very long time, and they know their work is likely to be collected by antique weather vane lovers in the future. They want their legacy to reflect their craftsmanship.”

LizAnne reports that the prolific artisans make about two or three weather vanes each month, depending on their size and complexity. “Typically, we make between about 125 to 150 weather vanes per year.”

Costs of the weather vanes range from about \$395 to \$25,000 with the average weather vane costing between \$2,500 to \$7,000.

For an investment like that, a customer might worry that inclement weather could damage their art. But the good news is, weather vanes do well in all sorts of climates, from the most remote Western mountains known for heavy snowfall and deep freezes to the warm southeast where hurricane force wind is something to be reckoned with.

In fact, weather vanes have always had incredible staying power. “In New England, there are handmade copper weather vanes that were installed before the American Revolutionary War, and some of them are still around today! It is hard to predict how long each individual weather vane will last, but a well-made copper weather vane will probably outlast any of us.”

“We have weather vanes in Alaska, above 8,000 elevation in the Rocky Mountains, at the end of Long Island and throughout Florida and to my knowledge they are still all doing fine,” LizAnne says.

Specific to Suri

At West Coast Weather Vanes, it is clear both the Jensens and the staff are dyed-in-the-wool animal lovers. There is an entire page of their website devoted to their

Opposite: LizAnne Jensen of West Coast Weather Vanes says Master Craftsman Victor Barreto “likes [to create] mythological subjects as they tend to be among our most complex designs and require the highest degree of technical challenge.” In this photo, Barreto is using a customized hammer to attain a specific texture on a mermaid weather vane.

Right: Pieces must start larger than the pattern to end up true to size because the hand-hammering makes them slightly convex. Here, the hand-worked copper sheeting with “locks” is measured against the sketch.

Bottom: Skylar the cat, Marilyn the Pyrenees dog and Moonlight at the Suri & Co. at Fern Creek Farm barn. “Moonlight has become more attached to Skylar and Marilyn after losing her partner Monroe this summer,” Jackie King says.



COURTESY LIZANNE JENSEN / WEST COAST WEATHER VANES

beloved office pets and the property is an animal-friendly zone for pets and wildlife. They routinely see deer, a variety of birds, squirrels and even bobcats and foxes.

It turns out that even these animal lovers and weather vane maestros learned a little something with the commission of Moonlight.

“What we found most interesting,” LizAnne says, “was the wide variation in the breed, both in fiber length and appearance. Because of the long, ropy texture in their coats, Suri alpacas are one of the most technically difficult designs we do, along with Shar Pei dogs. Hand-hammering in all that texture and then shaping the metal to achieve that look takes quite a long time to do.

“It takes a lot of experience working with copper to create that long, flowing coat and anticipate how it will all come together. Being able to master the technique involved in creating a Suri Alpaca is kind of the Holy

Grail of weather vane making,” she adds.

For Moonlight’s contrasting face, they used brass, which is 70% copper, creating a patina similar but not exactly the same color as copper.

“Because his eyes were covered by his fiber, a typical focal point in a weather vane, we used the brass to give his face a little more emphasis,” LizAnne says.


Timely and Timeless

The delivery of the weather vane was actually early, despite being handmade from start to finish.

“Our typical lead time is about six months from date ordered to date completed,” LizAnne says.

“I was told in February,” King says, “if the design process goes smoothly, the weather vane would be ready to ship by the end of August. I approved the final design in May and it was shipped at the end of July.”

Today, the Moonlight weather vane graces the apex of the King’s barn at the cupola. She says the barn is “the heart of my farm and home to my herd.”

“The results were better than I could have hoped,” King says. “I was amazed by the craftsmanship and how seamless the process was from design to installation.” 

SOURCES:

- Personal interviews LizAnne Jensen.
- Personal interviews Jackie King.



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