

SMITHVILLE

# Paper-doll Patriarch

*Just ask his fans:  
Artist Tom Tierney  
is a cut above.*

By Mary O. Parker



Meet artist Tom Tierney: the man known around the world for elevating paper dolls to an art form.

In his Smithville loft, his merry blue eyes sparkling, Tierney proudly points to the framed originals he sketched of Marilyn Monroe for his 1979 book about the Hollywood legend and the costumes she wore in each of her films. "This was the only paper-doll book ever reviewed by The New York Times," he says. Then, with raised eyebrows and a happy lilt, he adds, "It got a good review, too."

Other Tierney original drawings hang nearby, including those that appeared in Woman's World magazine of famous women in history and their costumes. "Here we have Amelia Bloomer," Tierney says. "She created bloomers so women wouldn't have to wear those horrible petticoats!" He shudders dramatically.

Drama comes naturally to Tierney, a Beaumont native whose multifaceted life as an artist, dancer and singer has brought about as many wardrobe changes, metaphorically speaking, as depicted in his beloved paper doll books that are coveted collector's items. A whirlwind of a life so far—at the age of 82, he shows no signs of slowing down—has brought stories in big-league publications (The New York Times and The New Yorker magazine), nightclub gigs in storied New York City venues such as The Plaza Hotel, and friendships with movie stars, such as the late Joan Crawford.

For Tierney, who moved back to Texas three years ago after spending most of his adult life in New York City, drawing has always come first. He started his formal art education at the age of 6, graduated from The University of Texas in 1949 with a bachelor of fine arts degree and launched a career as a department-store fashion illustrator.

Then fate, as it would time and again, intervened. After serving in the U.S. Army as a recruiting artist from 1951-53, Tierney moved to New York, using money from the GI Bill to enroll at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, one of the world's most prestigious art schools. The multitalented Tierney also studied ballet at the acclaimed Martha Graham Dance Company. Lithe and lean at 5 feet, 9 inches and 127 pounds, he glided across stages, even polishing a tap-dance routine that led to the nightclub circuit.

"Oh, that was a magic time," Tierney says of his younger years in New York City. "But you know, my whole life has been a magic time. God doesn't owe me a thing."

With a casual shrug, Tierney recounts how a torn leg tendon ended his professional dancing career and helped him make a pivotal decision: He would focus on art instead of dancing and singing. "I knew that art would last longer anyway," he says with a grin.

And indeed, it has. In collaboration with his longtime publisher, Dover Publications, Tierney has drawn art for about 400 paper doll books that feature—just to name a few subjects—brides from around the world, famous movie dance stars,

fashion designs of the Victorian era, Broadway musical stars, celebrity country singers, medieval costumes and American families from the pilgrim period through today (for more details, visit <http://tomtierney.com>).

It's all the result of what Tierney calls "a fortunate accident"—the Christmas present he gave his mother in 1975. As children, Tierney and his two younger brothers sat enthralled as their mother entertained them with a puppet show fashion using the paper doll collection she'd had since her childhood. So decades later, Tierney thrilled his mother with an extra-special gift: paper dolls he'd made of two of her favorite movie stars from the 1930s—Jean Harlow and Clark Gable.

His mother proudly showed the paper dolls to her friends—one of whom was friends with an influential literary agent. The result was Tierney's first book, *Thirty from the 30s*, which features movie stars from that decade. The book's success brought about a contract with another publisher, Dover, and set Tierney on the path to becoming America's best-loved paper doll maker.

Enthusiasts credit Tierney with resurrecting interest in paper dolls. These two-dimensional figures have been around for centuries in several countries, but in the 1960s, they were knocked off their U.S. throne by a new doll on the block—Barbie.

Tierney's 1930s movie-star book, published in 1976, put paper dolls back in the spotlight and made him a celebrity. His books, which can be found in museums worldwide, include depictions of U.S. presidents and first family members.

Tierney once received a handwritten letter from President Jimmy Carter that read, in part, "I'll be able to dress them and make them do what I want them to do." And former First Lady Nancy Reagan thanked Tierney for his book about the presidential couple.

We round a corner in the 1890s Smithville building that Tierney occupies and enter his cheery second-floor studio. Sunlight streams through tall windows and illuminates the bottles of ink on his drawing table like miniature rainbows. Sweeping his hands across the work space, he says, "This is where I do my creating, just sitting up here in my regal eagle's nest and having fun."

He shows me original drawings from his paper-doll book about the fairies in Shakespeare's play "A Midsummer Night's Dream." The vividness of a watercolored red-velvet costume is breathtaking, and Tierney explains he tries to make his drawings as historically accurate as possible through extensive research.

But sometimes, he has to rely almost exclusively on his creativity. "Imagine trying to find out what George Washington's underwear looked like before the Internet!" Tierney says, laughing.

After all these years, Tierney's creativity continues to percolate. "I'm not just a paper-doll guy," he stresses, explaining that he's seeking an agent for a children's storybook he just finished. Oh, he's also started designing 3-D paper theaters with movable parts. And he's been working on a series of Texas heroes paper dolls.

He interrupts himself with a characteristic burst of enthusiasm: "It's just that I've got so many ideas—I just can't seem to get everything done that I want to do!"

*Third annual Texas Paper Doll Party: March 26-27 in Smithville, [www.texaspaperdollparty.com](http://www.texaspaperdollparty.com)*

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