



Meet Jill Kenik of Acropolis Studios, Inc.

Acropolis Studios, Inc. was started in 1994 as a product development company servicing primarily the jewelry manufacturing industry. My professional career started in 1985, when I began my first job as a Men's Accessories Designer for Swank, Inc., in Attleboro, Massachusetts. That was a great job--a real training ground. The designers and model makers worked together in the same shop, and as a designer, I had the freedom to model my own designs to test out concepts that weren't quite ready for formal model making. I interfaced with the model makers everyday, and they taught me to use mills and lathes. For a couple of years, I designed men's watches; the cases, dials and hands. This was in the "old days", pre-computer, so I would hand draft the layouts for the faces. I also built the prototypes for the cases. That was a great way to learn precision drafting and machining.

My love affair with machines began when I started building watch case prototypes using Bridgeport mills and old Rockwell lathes. Hand drawing the faces would sometimes take a week or more with rapidographs, protractors, french curves and angles. The model making skills were developed to support design needs.

I also had the opportunity to work with the manufacturing component of Swank including the toolmakers, engineers and production managers. This again was a real learning opportunity. The toolmakers and engineers were wonderful with their explanations of what would work and what would not. As an industrial designer, it was instilled very early on



Jill Kenik, President of Acropolis Studios, Inc.

that a design had to be created for the manufacturing capabilities that were available. I was free to push the envelope if I could get the factory to go along with the plan, but always the designs had to be made with mass production in mind. I became very driven with this constant question of how to make a well designed piece that could be manufactured inexpensively. This need also drove me to understand tool design and manufacturing, step by step.

As a female model maker, this was the first time in my life that I really encountered gender bias. It came from some of the old factory supervisors. In their eyes I actually had three strikes against me; I was young, female and had a college degree. It was their mission to make sure I understood that I didn't know anything and wasn't worth their time. I spent a

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lot of time patiently standing in doorways, waiting to be seen, only to have my design literally thrown across the room. I guess I didn't know better. I was pretty naive that this stuff actually happened, so I would just politely take what they dished out and show up again the next day with another sample in hand. I think I finally just wore them down!

I worked at Swank for 7 years, and then took a job as New Product Liaison between Howard Sweet Company in Attleboro and Tiffany & Co. in New York. Sweet was owned by Tiffany at that time and this was another opportunity to push the issue of how to manufacture beautiful, high quality pieces. It was a great experience because I actually had to sit and do the factory work to get out the first run of samples--not appealing, but certainly educational. You learn to polish when you polish for Tiffany, and of course you learn about quality. Things were simply right or wrong. I worked at Sweet for about 2 years before moving on to a small company in Providence, RI. That move only lasted a few months before I started Acropolis Studios.

I graduated from Rochester Institute of Technology, in the School for American Craftsmen, with a BFA in Metalsmithing and Jewelry Design. After working in industry for about 7 years, I started graduate school part-time, earning an MBA from the University of Rhode Island. I needed the MBA to be a better designer. I needed to understand not just the manufacturing of the designs, but the whole business picture of getting a product to market.

I had an aunt and uncle, Jean and Bob Slenker, who were both university art professors. As a teenager, Aunt Jean would take me in on weekends and work with me on weaving,

jewelry making and sculpture. Jean was best known for her found-object steel sculptures. She made her reputation in the 60's and 70's doing what women weren't supposed to do.

"I have at least ten different ways of explaining what I do for work. When I am asked the question, I usually start by asking a few questions of my own to figure out the best way to explain. Around southern New England, just about everyone knows what a model maker does because of the ties to the jewelry manufacturing industry, which once dominated the area. It still drives me nuts that folks think computers allow you to push a few buttons and a piece pops out, but that will never change."

- Jill Kenik

She welded! Found-objects mostly meant found steel, as in junkyards. She had a great relationship with a good junkyard--a bunch of tough guys that were fascinated with what she was able to do with their scrap steel. I got to go with her on some junkyard excursions, loading up her old Honda with rusty treasures and

Coal Loading Machine, Pewter Miniature
Acropolis Studios, Inc.



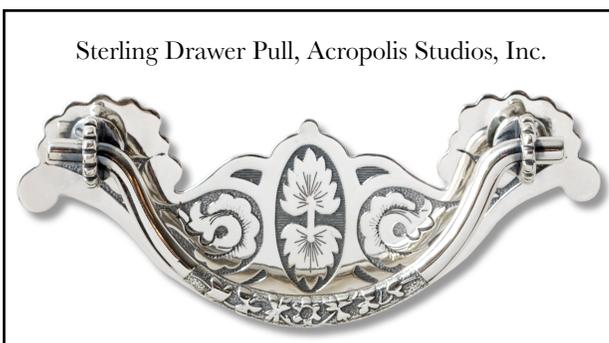
Women in Model Making, Continued



returning to her studio to assemble the odd parts into wonderful animals and sculptural figures. I never gave it a second thought that this was not something girls were supposed to do.

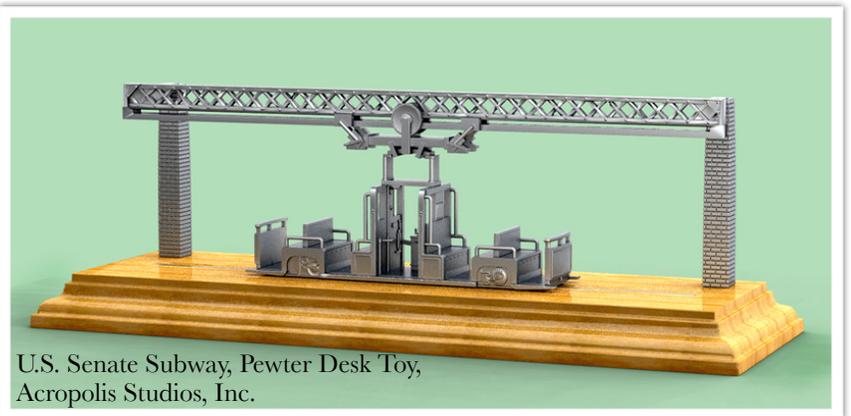
Many years later, I came to appreciate that she had really kicked down some barriers for women in her field. In particular, I remember a story of her explaining that she would not be following the university's dress code for female professors because she simply could not thread a weaving loom, which required laying on her back underneath the loom, with a dress on and maintain any form of proper, lady-like dignity. Of course, she was a very colorful woman, and her telling of the story was well in character!

I specialize in non-ferrous metal products, mainly for the giftware, flatware, trophy, decorative hardware and jewelry industries. I cover about anything from tie tacks to weathervanes. I prefer to get involved with projects where I can have some communication and discussion with the manufacturing side of the business--again, my concern is always that the work I do can be produced at the same high quality design and modeling level that started at Acropolis.



Accommodations for manufacturing techniques are considered from the beginning, not as a band-aid stuck on later. I keep my trained jeweler's eye for detail and apply it to larger scale products. We are CAD savvy, but nothing ever leaves the Studio without an artisan

working on it. There is nothing that will ever replace the eye and hand of the artist. I tell my clients who think that CAD is the only way to go, that it is actually just a tool in my Studio, not unlike my silversmithing hammers, or bench files, although it's a bit more expensive. We utilize in-house CNC



U.S. Senate Subway, Pewter Desk Toy, Acropolis Studios, Inc.

milling machines and 3D printers, but there is nothing that we cannot build completely by hand, old-school style.

I enjoy making. I am an artist at heart and get to show up for work everyday and design and make things. I also get a real charge out of seeing my work out in the world. Many times, I'm held in confidence by non-disclosures and can't say what I've done, but that doesn't stop me from having a real sense of pride and accomplishment when I see my work out in the world and know that it is good.

My advice to other women in the APMM; never stop learning and don't be afraid to get your hands dirty. Don't be ashamed of admitting you made a mistake; that really shocks people. Prove that you are the best through the quality of your work, not by explanations. Work twice as hard not because you are a female, but because you are good and you have passion for the work. The rest will follow.

www.acropolisstudios.com