



Meet the Kite Maker

Robert Trépanier

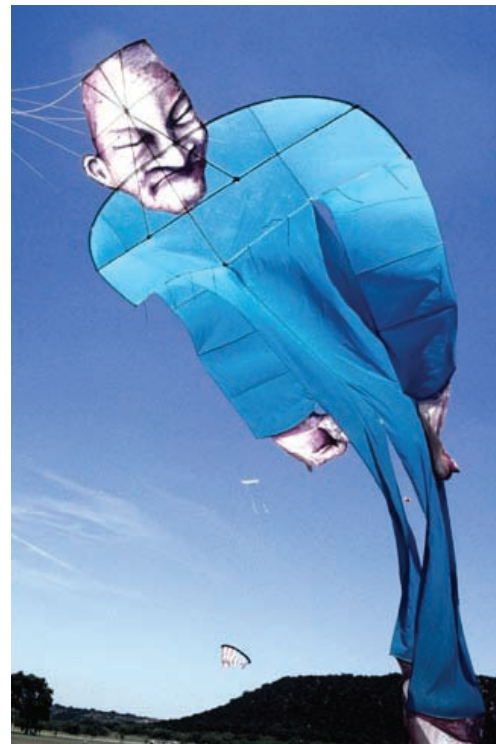


Photos by Ben Ruhe

What job will you have when you grow up? Engineer, musician, shop keeper, fire fighter, doctor, kite maker...? Maybe you have not thought of kite making as a job. But Robert Trépanier [Ro BEAR Tray pan yay] remembers an incident from his childhood that steered him toward this unusual occupation.

Robert is Canadian and grew up in a small town near Montreal. One evening his older brother ran outside after dinner to fly a kite he had made. Robert trailed along after him. He itched for a turn with the kite. Finally his brother gave him a chance to hold the line. Robert's mother called her sons in for the night—once, twice, three times. Robert kept on flying the kite. Finally he could no longer ignore his mother, but he wanted the kite to continue flying. He decided to tie his line to the fence. The next morning the kite was still flying. Robert was astonished! His feat set the neighborhood abuzz. Robert was proud that he had done something that his family and friends would notice. "At age seven I was a hero!"

Robert started to visit a kite store and became a regular customer. He asked the store owner many questions about kites. He learned so much about kites that he got a summer job at the store when he was older. Then he learned even more about kites—about stunt kites and about the history of different kinds of kites around the world. He even learned about aeronautics, how to design, construct, and navigate aircraft.



Pajama Man

Photos by Robert Trépanier

Robert also had other talents. He became a champion bicycle racer who competed across Canada. In college he studied industrial design. An industrial designer makes sure that products people use, from their toothbrushes to their computers to their cars, work well and look good. Robert used those skills for many years to design sets for plays in the theater.

But now Robert's theater is the sky, and the wind is his director. His job is to make kites. He sells his kites to art collectors worldwide. He travels as an invited guest to kite festivals around the world. Each year he also introduces thousands of school children in the Canadian province of Québec to the challenges of designing and building kites. For every two hundred children he teaches, Robert guesses that one may be inspired to continue experimenting with kites.

Robert uses both painting and drawing skills in creating his kites. He pioneered a technique for painting on ripstop nylon (the fabric from which many contemporary kites are made) so that the paint does not smudge or flake off the fabric. He observes faces and gestures in his daily life, and sketches constantly on envelopes or on napkins. Their images adorn his kites. Their faces or bodies may be oddly lengthened or twisted, sometimes even a little scary. But Robert says that he draws sad faces on his kites "to make those people fly or be lighter, to lighten their lives."



Photo by Robert Trépanier

Robert also draws many animals—bulldogs, bugs, birds, fish. Robert's father was a veterinarian, and also cared, sometimes, for the animals at the city zoo. People who see Robert's animal kites can be amazed. Robert agrees that seeing a dog's head or a frog's body flying in the sky can be



Dog in the Sky

Photo by Stuart Allen

surprising! He knows that the animals are “not in their place.” He likes to see his animal kites, and the people kites too, moving around in the “big open spaces” of the sky, where the light is always changing.

Kite artists can have a hard time making a living. Why? Because their kites may be too big to hang in an art gallery, where collectors usually see art to buy. Some people also think that kites are only toys. So Robert has begun to make smaller kites of paper and bamboo that will fit more easily in an art gallery. With these smaller kites, says Robert, you can appreciate such qualities as the texture of the paper and the craftsmanship of the construction. “You feel close to it because you see it’s only knots, paper and glue—very simple things.”

Robert also enjoys flying kites. When you fly a kite, he says, you can escape the unchanging force of gravity and feel lifted by the unpredictable wind. He believes that kite fliers “are different than the rest of the people. I think they still have something of their childhood. They want to play—they are people who like to play—and they like to have a smile on their face.”



Photo by Kiyomi Okawa



Photo by Ben Ruhe

Key Vocabulary for the Reading

Adorn: decorate; lend beauty to

Aeronautics: the design and construction of aircraft; theory and practice of navigation through air or space

Gesture: moving limbs or body to express thought or emphasis

Occupation: a job; an activity that provides a regular source of livelihood

Ripstop nylon: a strong synthetic fabric that does not tear easily

Smudge: smear or blur

Unpredictable: difficult to foresee



Photo by Bruce Maede