



## It's Good to Have Friends in Low Places

### Alicia Cusimano's Toad Abodes Cultivate Interspecies Cooperation

by Ricka McNaughton ( [theinsufficientskeptic.com](http://theinsufficientskeptic.com) ) 08-01-16

**B**efore coming to live permanently in the states, clay artist Alicia Cusimano spent a portion of her childhood on her family's working farm in southern Spain. With the hyper-clarity of childhood memory, she easily recalls the sights, sounds and fragrances of that warm land, home to growers of olives, lemons, avocados and pomegranates. Built low to the ground herself at the time, she came to know the small, wild, hopping and skulking creatures there. She had a kindly regard even for the most unlovely of these, such as toads who usefully devoured many types of insects that damaged the farmers' crops. She also has a memory of incautiously running around barefoot in the dry Andalusian landscape, a place where you would normally keep a sharp eye out for scorpions. Interestingly, no scorpion ever stung her. Call it sheer luck, or call it an unspoken pact of non-hostile intent between individuals of different species -- two creatures who are normally keen to poison or stomp the daylights out of one another. It may be the sort of Disneyesque relationship that strains the bounds of science, but some things manage to exist in the natural world without the benefit of well-catalogued field data. These early creature memories of Alicia's lend understanding to a creative outlet that she developed a great many years later.

Vaulting to the present, Alicia is now nearly 89 years of age. She came to live with her daughter Joyce in Marshfield, Vermont, just a few years ago. Soon after, with encouragement from Joyce, an accomplished potter, as well as instructors at the Mud Studio in Middlesex, Alicia began working in clay. A long-ago feeling wafted up and directed her to specialize in toad houses. She began turning out posh, cunning living quarters for tiny Vermont amphibians that are "our natural environmentalists," as she calls them. "It's been estimated that a toad will eat 10,000 pests in a growing season," Alicia said. "I like to offer them shelter from the elements. It's my way of giving back for what they do." Without chemicals, they helpfully rid the garden of some of the insects that bedevil gardeners.

More than 80% of their diet consists of bugs gardeners love to hate: Japanese beetles, cutworms, slugs, grubs, earwigs, tent caterpillars and the like.

"I can also confirm," Alicia reported, "that a lizard has moved into one of my little houses," thereby diversifying the neighborhood.

The structures combine her growing skill, her very capable architectural eye and no small amount of unleashed whimsy. For the toad houses, Alicia works from structural patterns of her own design, adding sculptural embellishments, textures and glazes that bring out the beauty of the piece. She has also done toad "teepees," birdbaths, vases, soap dishes and other pieces featuring natural motifs. (*Samples in photos at right.*) Another daughter owns a lavender farm in Virginia. "She has a lot of toads there. I send her my pieces and she also sells them at the local farmers market. They go really fast," Alicia said.

"I hope I'm an inspiration to people my age," she added. "Anyone can do this work if they're encouraged," she insisted, "as long as they are able to get around and function of course." And, presumably, if they also have her eye for form and function.

Although as a young woman Alicia took up oil painting, she never had any formal art training and put her brushes down after a while. In all the time between then and the start of her work in clay a few years ago, her own artistic output was dormant. However, she was surrounded by art. Alicia spent her life among many talented relatives and culturally attuned people. A brother owned a gallery in mid-town Manhattan and generously encouraged struggling artists. Her niece teaches art to children. Alicia seems to have had it in her DNA and passed it on to her children. And now with encouragement she's finally enjoying – very much enjoying -- an artistic outlet of her own again.

Seated on a stone wall in the lush garden outside her home recently, Alicia held up a sample toad abode to be photographed. "I wish I could make a big one of these and live in it," she said. With timing nothing short of impeccable, a live toad appeared. It hopped to within inches of Alicia's feet and paused as if to check out the real estate possibilities...or, as though it had helpfully dropped by for the toad-themed photo-shoot. Make of that coincidence what you will. The human participants decided, respectfully, not to try to maneuver or stress the toad for the shoot. Thus unengaged, the toad hopped off. □



*Some of Alicia's pieces will be on display (and for sale) in her exhibit **Artful Amphibians: Toad Houses and Other Art Honoring Our Amphibian Friends**, August 1 through September 11 at the Blinking Light Gallery, 16 Main St., Plainfield, VT 05667. Reception for the artist Friday, August 19, 5-7pm.*

*Regular gallery Hours: Thursday & Friday - 2:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m. Saturday & Sunday – 10:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. (802) 454-0141 [www.blinkinglightgallery.com](http://www.blinkinglightgallery.com). To contact the artist: Northlight Pottery 802-249-2506 [jcusimano@ezcloud.com](mailto:jcusimano@ezcloud.com)*