

It all Started with Asta

TORIE STEELE, MALIBU, CALIFORNIA

Torie Steele is well known in the fashion world as the founder of Torie Steele Boutiques, and in the dog world for breeding and showing top-winning Wire Fox Terriers. As I drive up to her house and kennel in Malibu, along California's beautiful Pacific coast, I can't help wondering how she



Torie Steele with Ch. Blackdale Ringmaster, also known as Pat



Torie Steele with Ch. Steele Mandalay's new litter of puppies

became interested in her breed, and so involved in the world of purebred dogs. As Torie explains it to me, she was captivated by Wire Fox Terriers, even as a young girl growing up in Texas. Like many of us, she had been introduced to the breed via the classic *Thin Man* film series, starring William Powell and Myrna Loy, who with Asta, the perceptive Wire Fox Terrier, set about to solve a variety of crimes. "For me," remembers Torie, "the breed embodied a sense of style and fashion that I found irresistible. Unfortunately my father did not agree with me. He kept buying big dogs like Boxers and German Shepherds." Torie's own sense of style eventually led her to a career in fashion, first as a model, and then as a business woman and owner of fashion boutiques bearing her name. She was instrumental in bringing the work of Italian fashion designers such as Valentino and Versace to the American market, opening her first Torie Steele Boutique in the early 1980s. "At the time," explains Torie, "department stores did not feature designers the way they do now. I knew many



A painting by Arthur Wardle of the legendary Ch. Barrington Bridegroom hangs in Torie's foyer

of the Italian clothing designers and I contacted them about representing their work in America. I was able to have six designer boutiques under one roof, giving European designers a foothold in America.” Recognized as a fashion industry leader at the time, Torie’s main store was on Rodeo Drive in Beverly Hills, but she had other stores around the country. Indeed, her concept became so popular that big department stores eventually followed suit, opening their own designer boutiques in their stores. Torie retired from the business in the 1990s, and now spends much of her time breeding and showing Wire Fox Terriers, her childhood love.

Torie’s first Wire Fox Terrier, appropriately named Asta, was her beloved companion. When she passed away, Torie was devastated. “I was heartbroken,” she recalls, “and I wouldn’t let it go. The breed became an



Christine Merrill, Ch. Blackdale Ringmaster, 2003, Oil on canvas, 16 x 20 inches

obsession with me. I started looking at every Wire Fox Terrier that I could find. I hunted and hunted and I finally found a breeder here in California, but she wouldn’t sell to me unless I agreed to show the dog. I didn’t want to show a dog. I had been to dog shows, but I wasn’t really interested.”

Torie fulfilled her agreement with the breeder though, even hiring the handler Bob Larouch to finish its championship. “Once I really started showing the dog, I realized that it wasn’t really that great,” explains Torie. With her sense of style and balance refined by years in the fashion business, Torie decided to find a really good Wire Fox Terrier. She read every book she could find on the breed, and researched breeders, both in America and across Europe, learning as much as she could about them. She hired a handler and consulted experts in the breed, building her own kennels in the late 1990s. She



The kennels are surrounded with lush vegetation, with a view of the Pacific Ocean

One of the display cases that hold just a few of the many ribbons and trophies won by Steele Kennels over the years

also hired Peter Green, a terrier expert and a highly respected handler to show her dogs, and with him, Torie's kennels went from success to success in the world of purebred dogs, with one extraordinary win after another. She has had the top winning Wire Fox Terrier in ten of the twelve years that she has been showing dogs and the number one terrier of all the terrier breeds in 2002. She has been awarded Best of Breed at the AKC/Eukanuba National Championship Dog Show in 2001, 2002, 2008, 2009 and 2010, and Best of Breed at the prestigious Westminster Kennel Club Dog Show in 2002, 2004, 2008 and 2010. Her Steele Wire Fox Terriers have won over forty Best in Shows.

Torie has an active breeding program for her dogs and she is justifiably proud of her accomplishments. "I breed for health and temperament and for bettering the breed, and that's important to me. I look at the pedigree, I look





Edgar Lemur grooms one of Torie's Wire Fox Terriers

at what's behind the dog and I look to make sure there are no health problems." She finds great satisfaction in showing a dog that she has bred herself. "When I see that dog go in the ring," she explains, "and knowing all that I've done to prepare it and that I've worked so hard, there is a real accomplishment in seeing the dog win."

Torie also finds good homes for any dog that she does not keep herself, explaining to new owners that, "if there's any reason in your life that you can't take care of this dog, bring it back and I'll re-home it. I don't care if it's ten years old! These dogs are my babies and in a way, they are mine forever."

Torie's kennel is state of the art, with heated floors and air conditioning, but it is relatively small, and small on purpose. She has worked out a system whereby she places dogs in loving homes, even when they are still actively being shown. She will often place a dog in a home and make agreements with the new owners to let her breed and show the dog. "And so they become pets at an earlier stage," she explains, "because I would like to keep fewer and fewer



The coastline of Malibu

dogs here in the kennel. I don't like to keep them here until they are old, because my heart won't let me do it anymore. I love them too much! I want them to find a good home, or spend every day here with me." Torie continues, "I think that I'm an odd duck in the dog show world. I know a lot of people think there are no pet people in the dog show world, but I really am. Each of my dogs has its own room in my kennels and each gets to come up to the house and hang out with me."

Torie chose Christine to paint Ch. Blackdale Ringmaster, an Irish, English and American champion, because she liked the old-fashioned look of Christine's paintings, with their classic English landscape backgrounds. "I was very attracted to the light in Christine's paintings," she explains, "and the way in which she captured the essence of each dog. Her dogs speak to you – they are not just flat images on a canvas." Ch. Blackdale Ringmaster, or 'Pat', as he was known to Torie, was very much a show dog and the top Wire Fox Terrier in the United States in 2000, 2001, and 2002, but Torie did not want an idealized portrait. She was familiar with the great animal painters of the nineteenth century, having collected oils by such artists as Maud Earl and Arthur Wardle over the years, and she wanted a portrait that captured her dog's individual personality.

"It's funny," remembers Torie, "I liked Christine's portrait the way she did it, with his mouth open, but Peter wanted him in a more idealized pose, with his mouth closed. I told Christine that I wanted his personality to come through and for him to come to life on the canvas, and that is exactly the way she did it, just as he looked."