

CREATION IN THE HAND: THE LIFE IN FOLK ART DOLLS

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As museum curators, our strongest efforts in first person interpretation seek to connect the visitor with the period of the site around them. Get them to think and relate, view the past as a reality instead of an unknown fairy tale, and make them understand that people who lived in the past were real human beings like them. People will be more willing to step into this foreign country if they are shown familiar territory; something they know that makes them feel safe in a strange land. Dolls are the perfect mechanism for interpretation because we can all relate to them. Almost every child growing up possessed a Barbie, a GI Joe, or any other of the countless action figures and dolls whose ads saturated the breaks between Saturday morning cartoons.

As a member of the museum going public, my encounters with dolls have been almost forgotten. They are part of the half remembered jumble of lifeless toys strategically placed on the second story of a house museum's nursery, or in hands on activities where groups of tiny hands create watered down versions of the original. In both cases they are dismissed with the simple interpretation of, "They had dolls back then." These small ambassadors have so much more to offer than that. My research into the history of dolls has shown that they have been companions to human kind almost as long as the dog has, and they have been a part of every culture. They have united the whole of the human experience, and so I ask, why not use them to bridge the gap between the present and the past? Folk dolls in particular are excellent guides. These little handmade beauties are an interpreters dream. They reflect the people who created

them and allow for a wide ranging dialogue about children, trade, money, and family.

Dolls have been the constant companions of children since almost the beginning of time; or at least since the beginning of human settlement. The earliest dolls were wooden paddle shaped ones found in Egypt in 2000 BCE. In Greece in the 6th century BCE, there were articulating dolls with painted on clothes, and a century later people were making and selling dolls that could be dressed throughout the eastern Mediterranean.¹ It is believed dolls like these came into the world as simplified versions of the religious idols carried in pockets or standing watch in temples. The earliest known European idols are those of a fat-hipped goddess from the Paleolithic and Neolithic cultures of Europe; archeologists have been uncovering them since the beginning of the profession.² The shift from idol to toy can be seen in the word for doll. In Latin the word for a votive image, "pupa" or "puppa," also means girl and, more importantly, doll. From this, we can see verbally how the idol of a goddess became a toy.³

The religious ritual of creating corn dollies in England, serves to illuminate how easily an idol could become a doll. Early Britons believed that the spirit of the crops lived in their wheat, and when they harvested it in the fall the spirit became homeless. To provide a home for the spirit and cultivate his good will, the last sheaves of the harvested wheat was plaited into a corn dolly in which the spirit could live.⁴ As the skill of plaiting was passed down to the next generation, the children probably practiced their new skills by plaiting their own toys. The children would not have been hindered by the religious connections of their craft since in later years, during the English

¹Deborah Jaffe, *The History of Toys; For spinning Tops to Robots* (Gloucestershire: Sutton Publishing, 2006), 124, 125.

²E.B. Renaud, "Prehistoric Female Figurines from America and the Old World," in *The Scientific Monthly*, 28, No. 6 (Jun. 1929): 507-512.

³Jaffe, *The History of Toys*, 122.

⁴Ibid., 123.

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Reformation, children adopted the religious icons they found in plundered monasteries as dolls.⁵

Dolls became commercialized fairly early in their history. In the Middle Ages, dolls made of wood, solid wax, or molded paper pulps were sold at fairs in Florence and Venice.⁶ But it was in Germany that the doll industry took off. In the fourteenth century, Nuremberg and Sonneberg's guilds each specialized in making dolls out of their respective trade's materials. In 1465, Ott and Mess began to carve wooden dolls as a profession. These early craftsmen made their dolls by hand. Guildsmen created them as sidepieces, made from scraps during the spare time. In this sense, they were not mass-produced. When doll-making became a specialized industry; hundreds of pieces were turned out every day and shipped great distances. Through this industrialization, the process of conscious individual creation was lost. Individual people still made the dolls, but they were making a large number of them all at once.

By the Sixteenth century, Germany turned out very sophisticated wooden and white clay dolls for the rest of Europe.⁷ By the seventeenth century, Nuremberg alone had seventeen doll makers.⁸ Paris also produced dolls at the same time as Germany. These wooden and wax dolls were fashion dolls; they were meant to display the latest fashions to provincial adults.⁹

European manufactured dolls arrived in America with the first European explorers. Trade trunks contained wooden dolls called Bartholomew babies. These dolls were sold in the street and at Bartholomew Fair in England.¹⁰ In 1585, the painter John White depicted an Indian girl holding one of these dolls. Shop-made dolls became more widely available with the beginning of

the consumer revolution in the eighteenth century. The growth of the middle class created a wider market; toyshops opened in England for the first time, and stores began to carry toys on their shelves.¹¹ In Salem, Massachusetts, a farmer was recorded as purchasing a doll for his child.¹² George Washington ordered a "neat dress'd wax baby" from England for his stepdaughter.¹³

Dolls became even more available during the Industrial Revolution, which enabled dolls to be made on a massive scale, and shipped to distant places. By 1880, Sonneberg in Germany was producing and shipping fifteen million dolls a year.¹⁴ At this point we can definitely say that commercial and folk art dolls became two separate categories. Conscious individual creation and hand craftsmanship were lost as the factory assembly line created uniformity among the products.

Before it is completed a doll passed through many hands. The heads, hands, and feet are made by one person, the body by another, the hair is fixed on by another and the face is painted by two other different people, one doing the rough work and the second the finishing touches. Clothes are made by another person and the dresses are put on by still another.¹⁵

A girl in England could have a tea party with her doll while an American girl took its identical twin to see the cows out back. New technological innovations, such as the perfection of the china head, allowed formerly expensive dolls to become affordable for the middle class.¹⁶ To reach a wider market, companies began to sell china heads and limbs separately so that parents could buy them and sew them onto a homemade body created with their newly-acquired sewing machine.¹⁷ Magazines

⁵Ibid., 126.

⁶Wendy Lavitt, *The Knopf Collectors' Guides to American Antiques: Dolls* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983), 10.

⁷Lavitt, *The Knopf Collectors' Guides to American Antiques: Dolls*, 10.

⁸Ibid., 11.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Wendy Lavitt, *American Folk Dolls* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982), 3.

¹¹Lavitt, *The Knopf Collectors' Guides to American Antiques: Dolls*, 11.

¹²Lavitt, *American Folk Dolls*, 4.

¹³Ibid., 11.

¹⁴Jaffe, *The History of Toys*, 127.

¹⁵"Where Toys come from," in *Current Literature* (Vol. 3, No.6, Dec. 1889), 535.

¹⁶Lavitt, *The Knopf Collectors' Guides to American Antiques: Dolls*, 12.

¹⁷Ibid.

and books further facilitated this by featuring articles on, or wholly devoting themselves to, the making of dolls. These factors, and the decrease in wooden doll quality because of poor manufacturing, lead to a growth in the popularity of rag and cloth dolls.¹⁸

The outbreak of World War I shifted the doll manufacturing market from Paris and Germany, which had been considered the cradle of doll manufacturing, to America and Japan.¹⁹ The Great Depression put an end to many of America's doll manufacturers and the few that survived held on by producing dolls modeled after movie stars.²⁰ It was not until 1949 that the creation of hard plastic, which allowed for the creation of Barbie and G.I. Joe, revolutionized the American doll market, and raised dolls to a new level of consumerism.²¹

The Tarble Arts Center at Eastern Illinois University defines folk art as objects created by a non-academically trained artist that connotes some form of individual expression; they should also represent the shared aesthetic traditions of a community or geographic area, and those of a specific ethnic, religious, or family group. Usually such art passes from one generation to the next and often comes from a craft tradition, rather than a fine arts tradition, and may also include self-taught artists, along with those historically classified as 'naïve,' 'primitive,' or 'outsider.' Beneath this definition fits all manner of arts and crafts that every day people have been creating for their own needs since the beginning of human civilization. While this may stir up images of baskets and portraits, it also includes those small things easily forgotten. Such is the nature of dolls. The key factor that separates a folk art doll from Barbie is how it is made. Folk dolls are created by hand, rather than by machine, out of any materials available to their creators. People who make them do it for both the enjoyment found in the process of making

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Ibid., 13.

²⁰Ibid., 14.

²¹Ibid.

them, and for the finished doll itself. Each doll is a conscious individual creation; they are not just rattled off in piles. The individualistic nature that's comes from conscious creation of folk art dolls makes them rich sources on information about their maker's past, economic and cultural traditions.

They are rich with exhibit possibilities. Marilyn Kinnett, who learned to make dolls growing up in Ohio during the Great Depression, came from a tradition of folk dolls. By looking at her process and her creations we can extract a very wide sweeping narrative about her and her world. For Marilyn, doll making is equated with family, especially its female network. Her mother and grandmother both taught her to make dolls. They showed her how to sew by hand and sewing machine. They also taught her how to make dolls with available odds and ends, such as potato mashers, wooden spoons and corn husks. This tradition of making dolls out of any available material is a common feature of folk dolls.²²

Marilyn was born in 1931, in the midst of the Great Depression, when toys were the last thing a family would spend money on. This frugality is reflected in the rag dolls that she and her mother made. They never bought cloth specifically for dolls. The material always came from her mothers "endless rag bag," and Marilyn described stuffing them with "anything we could find, from old hoes, old cotton hoes, to comfort bedding, ya know. Anything we could find to stuff with."²³

The materials that children and adults used to make dolls reflected the environments in which they lived, and their economic status. For example, a middle class farming family in the late 1800's might have a doll with a homemade body and a china head bought from a local store or peddler.²⁴ The stuffing of the dolls body, animal hair or plant fibers, would reflect the natural environment in which they lived, whereas the china head shows that they had disposable income, connections to,

²²Jaffe, *The History of Toys*, 122.

²³Ibid.

²⁴Lavitt, *The Knopf Collectors' Guides to American Antiques: Dolls*, 12.

and participation in, the industrial market. On the other hand, a doll that a London street urchin made from a discarded shoe in 1901 reflects her manufactured, urban environment and destitute condition.²⁵ In Marilyn's case the materials she used were also used by her mother, and grandmother: wooden spoons, cloth, corn husks, potato mashers, apples. We can discern that she grew up in a semi rural farming environment. Potato mashers, cloth and wooden spoons are store goods but apples and cornhusks are products of a rural farming community. Marilyn states that "we made things from everything imaginable. Everything nature had to make dolls."²⁶

Marilyn's mother's specialty was rag dolls. She used her own patterns, as well as those which her husband's mother passed down to her. These patterns were part of a wider commercial trend that began around 1880 with the invention of the domestic sewing machine. Factory production had decreased the quality of wooden dolls, and as a result, combined with the sewing machine, there was an increase in the home manufacturing of rag dolls. This was accompanied by a flurry of magazine articles and books on doll making, as well as pieces of cloth that had dolls preprinted on them so that the maker only had to cut out the doll, sew it, and stuff it. Harper's Bazaar published an article in 1902 which gives detailed instructions on how to make a "well-made and well-dressed rag doll," along with a pattern to make a doll with.²⁷ The closure of the major doll factories in Germany and France due to the First World War strengthened the cloth doll movement even further.²⁸ It is likely that some of the patterns that were passed down to Marilyn's mother came from this emergence of popularity for the rag doll.

Just as her mother- in- law had done, Marilyn's mother passed on the patterns and the art of doll making to her

²⁵Jaffe, *The History of Toys*, 123.

²⁶Marilyn Kinnett, interview by Jan Laude, ½ inch reel, Folk Art interview, Rossville, IL, Aug. 16, 1983, Tarble Arts Center.

²⁷M. E. Acker, "Home Made Dolls For the Children," in *Harper's Bazaar* (Vol. 36, No. 1, Jan.1902), 72.

²⁸Jaffe, *The History of Toys*, 137.

daughter. In turn, when Marilyn married and had children she taught them how to sew and make dolls just as her mother and grandmother had taught her. In a way, doll making became a way of initiating new female members into the family. This was done in the passing on of patterns for stuffed animals from Marilyn's paternal grandmother, to her mother, to Marilyn herself, and then to her daughter- in- law. "I told my daughter-in-law, who's married to my youngest son, that she could make animals.... So we sat down one day [with] all the patterns and... she started in and she makes beautiful animals."²⁹ Sewing was a way of interacting with and creating relationships among the female members of the family, as well as a means of passing on the tradition of doll making. The passing on of doll making from one generation to the next serves as a bonding experience between those generations. These learning experiences create memories carried with the student for the rest of their life. Thus to create a doll revives memories of family.

I have an apple head grandmother and grandfather up on the beam. And those are the ones that my grandmother taught me how to do in an old summer kitchen. She would sit with the apples and she would peel the apples first and then cut the pieces and then hang them up to dry and as it dried I'd watch the pieces change and when it was thoroughly dried she's (unintelligible) with the pipe cleaners that were my grandfather's (unintelligible), dress them as people and they'd be believable. ...Nice warm feeling to think that I can pass something on that my grandmother helped me learn. Everyone always has a favorite grandmother.³⁰

Marilyn was still able to recall this at the age of fifty-two, with grandchildren of her own. By passing on the art of apple head doll making to her children and grandchildren, as it was taught to her, she symbolically passes on her grandmother to what would have been her great and great, great grandchildren.

²⁹Kinnett, Interview.

³⁰Ibid.

The apple head dolls are particularly auspicious in the passing on of familial memories. Dried apple remains have been found in Switzerland that date back to the Neolithic era.³¹ Like humans, the humble apple is “a readily adaptable form of life. Its rich gene pool yields to infinite variations both in fruit and in the adaptability of the plant to climactic conditions.”³² This wondrous variety gives each apple its own personality. This personality is revealed when the apple is peeled, carved, and set up to dry. Each head, despite the fact that they might have all been carved alike, takes on the face of a unique character.³³ By making apple head dolls, Marilyn keeps her grandmother’s memory alive, but at the same time creates something new and unique for the next generation.

By teaching Marilyn how to make dolls, her mother and grandmother taught her a skill and a medium through which to be creative. Being good at something instilled confidence in Marilyn and made her feel more comfortable in the world. People admired her skills and she felt confident enough to set up a small shop in Rossville, Illinois called *Little Folks N’ Country Critters*, where she sold her dolls. In this respect, her doll making allowed her to communicate with the people and children who came into her store. The original American apple head dolls served the same purpose. The Oneidas and Seneca who lived in the northeastern United States made them from crabapples and later, after European settlement, apples. They were used to make “happy heads or wish dolls” that represented the spirit Loose Feet, who granted small children wishes. These dolls were given to children not as playthings but as symbols of good fortune.³⁴ Dolls allowed children to talk directly to Loose Feet and ask him

³¹Boria Sax, “Apples,” in David Scofield Wilson and Angus Kress Gillespie (eds.), *Rooted in America: Folklore of popular Fruits and vegetables* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1999), 2.

³²Fred Lape, *Apples and Man* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1979), 9.

³³Lavitt, *American Folk Dolls*, 59.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 92.

for assistance. This gave children a sense of protection, which in turn, could foster self-confidence.

Apples themselves have a history in America as being a sign of control and comfort. The first apple trees came with French and British settlers.³⁵ “By 1638 William Baxton of the Massachusetts Bay Colony had established the first American apple orchard [only eight years after the founding the colony].”³⁶ The early settlers were afraid of the wilderness in which they found themselves, and the apple tree, became a way for them to symbolically tame the land and give them of stability in the unknown. A representative of Charles I decreed, in 1641, “that anyone receiving 100 acres must plant apple trees.”³⁷ This stipulation continued later on when the Northwest Territory was opened up. A land grant there “required a settler to ‘set out at least fifty apple or pear trees’ as a condition of his deed. The purpose of this rule was to...[encourage] homesteaders to put down roots. Since a standard apple tree normally took ten years to fruit, an orchard was a mark of lasting settlement.”³⁸ In this way, apples were a sign civilization that gave a settler some reassurance and confidence that the wilderness he found himself in would not swallow him up.

Apple, and the dolls made from them, became a security blanket for the early settlers and pioneers to cling to as they faced the greater wilderness of the world. A settler looking out his front door into a small grove of reassuring apple trees could stand a little taller, feeling secure in the wilderness and confident that he could make it, even if this confidence was falsely brought on by applejacks.

This brings us back to Marilyn. One of the first things Marilyn remembers about doll making is her mothers “endless rag bag, because she made some for everyone in town, rag

³⁵Lape, *Apples and Man*, 17.

³⁶Boria Sax, “Apples,” 4.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 5.

³⁸Michael Pollan, *The Botany of Desire; A Plants view of the World* (New York: Random House, 2001), 16.

dolls...."³⁹ In this way dolls, for Marilyn became associated with community and giving, especially to the communities smallest members; its children. Like her mother, her doll making "started out as a hobby with my own children and my neighbor's children and all my relatives too. Always had to have a doll or a [stuffed] animal for a birthday, Christmas or whatever."⁴⁰ The shop was a larger manifestation of her mothers "endless rag bag." This is apparent in the nature of the shop. Marilyn allowed the children who came full range of the store, allowing them to pick up and play with everything.

The kids were all, don't touch anything when they went into a store. Nothing was to be touched. An in this store they can come in and pretty well pick things up, do what they want to with them. They don't damage um. I have very little damage from...children except picking things up and putting things down maybe in the wrong place, which I do when I deal with them.⁴¹

Marilyn's store was not about profit; it was about seeing the children's faces and interacting with them. "...this is the main point of it, to see the children's faces when they walk in the door and they see this animal or this doll and 'oh molly!' you know, 'oh molly!' Well I really enjoy this. The children are so good."⁴² Marilyn's dolls were made to be played with and used by the community's children, not to be used as display pieces. *Little Folks N' Country Critters* made dolls a sign of community by bringing children and their parents in contact with Marilyn and her family.

In early America, apples achieved the same importance. As stated above, apples were a sign of community. "Every small village had its cider mill operating during late summer and fall." The mill became a meeting place for the community. Apple head dolls are also community oriented. It is very common to find

³⁹Kinnett, Interview.

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Ibid.

them in pairs, as is the case with the old man and woman that the Tarble Arts Center acquired from Marilyn. More recently "apple head dolls [have been] made in groups as part of scenarios holding special meaning for the doll maker."⁴³

Folk dolls have not gone untouched by consumerism. The most striking case of their brush with it can be seen in the story of Mary McAboy of Montana and her Skookum dolls: she represents the darker half of Marilyn. Mary McAboy appears to have learned how to make apple head dolls from her mother. Mary had also learned how to make dolls from her mother for friends when she was growing up. She also sold them at social events. When Mary's husband, Frank, died she remembered this skill and sent in an application to the United States Patent office for a patent on a man and a woman apple head doll dressed as Indians, which she called Skookums.⁴⁴ "Skookum" means "good" in the language of the Chinook Indians.⁴⁵ She was granted her patent four months later, in February 1914 and began to make and sell her Skookum dolls. They became very popular, so much so that she was able to sell the business to Harry Heye Tammen, of H.H. Tammen Company, who began to distribute them in San Francisco, New York, Canada, and Mexico.⁴⁶ While Mary remained in charge of the dolls assembly for 38 years, the materials used to make the dolls changed. The apple heads were replaced with composite heads and later, in the 1940's, by plastic heads.⁴⁷ The instant that Mary's dolls left her hands and were produced on the large scale they ceased to be folk dolls. The making of the doll is the key to whether or not it is folk art. Making the dolls by hand is what separates mass produced dolls from the folk dolls.

⁴³Lavitt, *American Folk Dolls*, 59.

⁴⁴Linda Larouche, ed., "How it began," in *Skookum News: An online Newsletter for Collectors*, 1, No. 1 (Summer 2001) <www.skookumnews.com>

⁴⁵Kinnett, Interview.

⁴⁶Larouche, ed., "How it began," <www.skookumnews.com>

⁴⁷Ibid.

While folk dolls cannot be mass-produced by machines, the materials and reasons for making them can change. With the Industrial Revolution and modern technology, materials have become more widely available and, according to Marilyn, have improved in quality: “yarn has improved, you know by the way. Beautiful yarn now, and everything is better; the thread the material.”⁴⁸ Since what is available to people has changed it is only natural that the material out of which dolls are constructed would follow suit. It is the natural process of folk art dolls; use what is available. Marilyn bought and scavenged material for her dolls. Naturally, the amount of disposable income played a part in how much material she could buy and how much she had to scavenge. When she had her children, she made dolls out of the material scraps from the clothes she made them, but once they were gone she began to purchase material specifically for making dolls.⁴⁹

Consumerism has also changed the look of folk dolls through its cultural influence. Prior to the arrival of the Europeans the Oneidas and Seneca’s dolls “were unclothed except for occasional husk garments. Later dolls wore a blend of European and Indian costumes, reflecting the tribal habit and contact with the white settlers.”⁵⁰ The same was true for folk dolls around the turn of the twentieth century. German doll manufactures had perfected the use of China for a doll’s heads, and began selling the heads, arms, and legs separately so that parents could buy them and attach them to home made bodies. In this way folk doll hybrids were created.⁵¹

Pop culture has also affected folk dolls. Marilyn made a Jiminy Cricket doll after the character in *Walt Disney’s Pinocchio*.⁵² He is a pop culture icon but Marilyn created the pattern for him and sewed him by hand. Consumerism has also changed the way the dolls are used. While all of Marilyn’s dolls

⁴⁸Kinnett, Interview.

⁴⁹Ibid.

⁵⁰Lavitt, *American Folk Dolls* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982), 92.

⁵¹Ibid., 11.

⁵²Kinnett, Interview.

were meant to be used and played with by children, many of the apple head dolls made today are created to be works of art or for display. Today “apple head dolls [are] often made in groups as part of scenario,” which recreate “local settings, scenes from American history and famous plays.”⁵³ In the end, what sets folk dolls apart from industrial dolls is the fact that they are born from one set of hands and placed directly into another’s. There is heart and memory placed into each doll which transfers over to the new owner who builds onto the memories. They do not arrive fresh from the box without context behind them.

Dolls hold a special place in folk art. Their creation can inform us about the physical and mental world in which their creators grew up. No matter whether it’s an apple head doll, a rag doll or a lovingly revamped discarded shoe, these dolls cannot be swallowed up by commercialism. Like a magic trick, the instant the hands and mind of a maker and their conscious individual creation are replaced with doldrum repletion of the machine or multiple hands, the trick is revealed and the magic is lost. This is not to say that folk dolls cannot be made and sold in large numbers. Marilyn Kinnett’s *Little Folks N’ Country Critters* is proof that a maker of folk dolls can retain their artistic integrity and function in harmony with consumerism.

A folk doll, because it is a conscious creation with so much put into it, becomes a small window into the world of its makers and owners. Using a doll as a bridge for the time period of your site would be a good way to guide children’s groups. By simply asking them, ‘What is it made of?’ you can lead them into the natural and man made resources available to people and the kinds of skills people possessed that allowed them to make the doll. Or you could jump off into family ties and holidays and the lives of children. ‘Imagine if this single doll was your only real toy. What are some of the games you could play with it?’ Even if your talking to a group of boys and girls, you could easily grab the boys attention by pointing out that this was the equivalent of an action figure, or that a sisters doll would need accessories

⁵³Lavitt, *American Folk Dolls*, 59.

such as carved horses and beds and houses. A doll table of contents could work just as well for guiding a group of adults. By posing the same question of 'What is it made of, and how did they get it?' you can invite them to pose that question to all of the artifacts they see and begin to construct an idea of the processes that made up the life of people during that time. Or you could put on a work shop where people are invited to bring their old cloths and rags and learn how to make rag dolls. You could go round the room and try to interpret people's lives from their dolls. The possibilities are truly endless. So let us take our dolls off the shelf and breathing life into them so that others may be caught in their glow and stop to wonder why.