Milliner's Models, or Varnished Heads

BY GREGORY LEFEVER

CONTRARY TO THEIR NAME, THESE PAPIER-MÂCHÉ DOLLS WERE NEVER INTENDED AS FASHION MODELS FOR SHOPKEEPERS BUT SIMPLY AS CHILDREN'S TOYS.

COURTESY OF ABBY ALDRICH ROCKEFELLER FOLK ART MUSEUM, GIFT OF ABBY ALDRICH ROCKEFELLER

***Portrait of Mary Jane Smith*, by Joseph Whiting Stock, 1838, Springfield, Massachusetts. According to an inscription on the back of the canvas, Mary Jane was just over 2 when her father paid $12 for this portrait, in which she holds a papier-mâché doll with an Apollo's Knot hairstyle, dressed in fashionable clothing.**

Legend has it that a particularly charming style of doll known as the "milliner's model" functioned in early America as a mini-mannequin, displaying in millinery shops the latest European fashions both in clothing and coiffure. The problem is, the doll in question had nothing to do with milliners and was not a model. It was—and always was intended to be—a toy.

Yet that fact in no way detracts from these highly collectible dolls created in the mountain hamlets of Germany's Thuringian Forest in the early 1800s and treasured by children and adults alike throughout Europe and America.

"These beautiful papier-mâché dolls continued to be made in great quantities until the middle of the nineteenth century and were increasingly popular to judge by the very large numbers that have come down to us," according to the late John Darcy Noble, curator emeritus of the Toy Collection of the Museum of the City of New York and a highly respected doll authority. "With their small, comfortable sizes, their lightness and delicacy, and their precise and intense romanticism, these dolls speak most eloquently of the taste of their times."

The dolls are easily identified by their papier-mâché busts, kid leather bodies stuffed with sawdust, and carefully carved wooden limbs. Most distinctive, however, are the

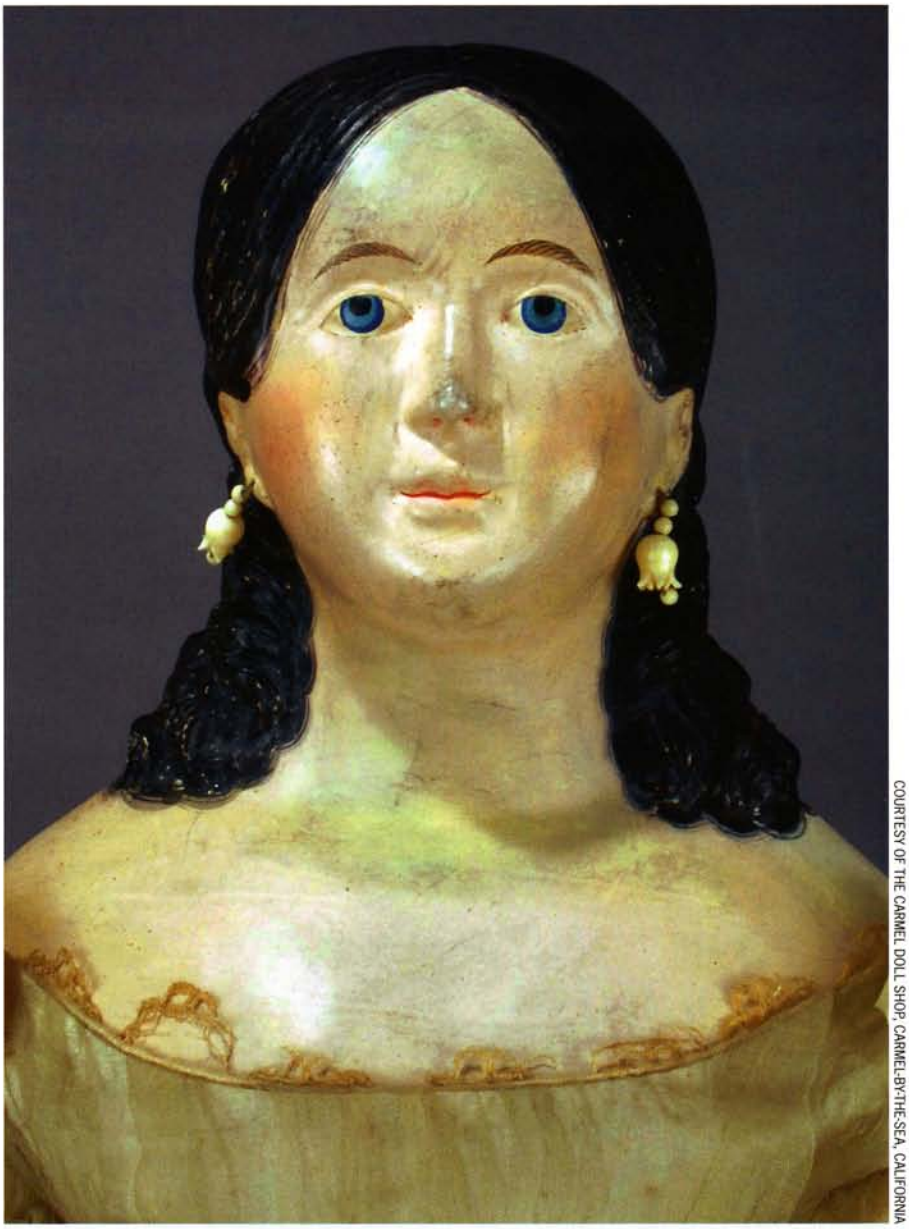
hairstyles and clothing. The dolls exhibit a veritable parade of period hairstyles—from short curls of the 1810 era to the highly piled Apollo Knots of the 1830s—all accurately replicated in molded papier-mâché. Their attire often precisely mirrors the haute couture of the first half of the 19th Century, reflecting the period's dramatic shifts in fashion from Empire to Biedermeier styles.

Today's collectors will find in the surviving so-called milliner's models a wide assortment of sizes, styles, and conditions, all dictating the doll's value.

"Price is a tough question," according to Michael Canadas, co-owner of what is likely the country's most prestigious doll store, the Carmel Doll Shop in Carmel-by-the-Sea, California.

"A starting price would be about $200 and would go up into the $20,000 range. A lot of factors come into play: the hairstyle, size, condition, clothing, and provenance—it all adds up. They're really a historic doll, but you can still find a nice one in the thousand-dollar range."

COURTESY OF THE CARMEL DOLL SHOP, CARMEL-BY-THE-SEA, CALIFORNIA



COURTESY OF THE CARMEL DOLL SHOP, CARMEL-BY-THE-SEA, CALIFORNIA

Standing 33 inches tall, this German papier-mâché doll is extraordinary for her height and condition. Her body is leather, and her wooden limbs have retained their original paint. Her dress of natural cotton gauze married to blonde lace and cream satin bows appears to be her original costume. The doll's hairstyle is also unusual, featuring a cascade of long curls that come to rest on her shoulders and back, which accentuate the doll's pierced ears. She is in remarkable condition for so large a doll from the early 1800s.

A MISNOMER THAT STUCK

Pursuing the etymology of the term "milliner's model" might seem like a tangent to a discussion about the dolls themselves, but it bears directly on some startling aspects of antique doll collecting. First, you might be surprised to know that collecting antique dolls as a hobby dates back only to the 1920s; second, nearly all of the valid research into the entire genre of historical dolls has occurred in the past eighty years, since the 1930s.

Antique doll collecting is a young field, ripe with the possibility of new findings—a rare doll being discovered in a museum storeroom, a lost letter suddenly turning up that describes a particular doll's origins—with much history still to be explored.

Perhaps the earliest documented name for this particular style of

COURTESY OF THE CARMEL DOLL SHOP, CARMEL-BY-THE-SEA, CALIFORNIA

This rare French papier-mâché doll from the early 1800s stands just over 8 inches tall. Her classic dress is striped silk. She came to the Carmel Doll Shop in her period packaging—a box with lace-paper edging—surprisingly intact. That likely explains why she still has her matching capelet, muff, and bonnet of pale gray mohair.

papier-mâché doll is "varnished heads," as found in the *1829-1833 Day Book of Lewis Page*, in the collection of the Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum. Page was referring to the particularly high grade of varnish German dollmakers developed for the papier-mâché heads.

As for "milliner's model," contemporary doll historians trace its origin to American doll collector and author Eleanor St. George. Another leading doll historian, Dorothy S. Coleman, writing about "varnished heads" in her 1984 book, *Collector's Book of Dolls' Clothes: Costumes in Miniature, 1700-1929*, stated: "In the twentieth century, Eleanor St. George named this type of doll 'Milliner's Model.' Her correspondence indicates that this was a name she created without historical documentation or precedent for it."

Noble, writing in the May 1992 issue of *Dolls Magazine*, was more acerbic. "As long ago as the 1930s, Yankee collector Eleanor St. George was writing one of the first doll books and felt the need of a name for what were amongst her favorite dolls. She boldly coined the quite inaccurate sobriquet: Milliner's Models. This absurdity has stuck to these unlucky dolls for over 60 years."

Adding to the confusion is "milliner." Believed to originate from the Latin term *mille* for "thousand," millinery shops in the 18th Century sold a vast assortment of hats, clothing, and household items, including dolls. In the 19th Century, the term was narrowed to describe mainly shops selling hats and some clothing. No known documentation substantiates dolls being used regularly as mannequins to sell either.

Canadas, who is active with the respected United Federation of Doll Clubs and who with his fellow co-owner, David Richmond, now edits the federation's publication, *Doll News*, said recently, "I know there are historians who really would like the term 'milliner's model' to just go away. But it's not going to. If you think about 'milliner's model' and you think about 'varnished head,' I'm afraid 'milliner's model' just sounds better.

"Besides," he continued, "it's just language now. If you say 'milliner's model' to me, I know exactly what you mean. Do I think it has anything to do with milliners or with being a model? No, I don't. It was a toy."

POPULAR PULP PAPER

Papier-mâché—French for "chewed paper"—was known for centuries in China and Japan, but not until the 1400s did Europe's earliest paper mills begin generating enough scrap pulp to enable wider use of paper that was soaked in glue and then molded into shapes. For the next two centuries, small workshops across Europe produced devotional pictures, carnival objects, vases, busts, sculptures, and even wigs of papier-mâché.

A few prominent toymakers converged in the late 1700s in the closely knit villages in central

Germany's Thuringian Forest, where two important technical developments occurred in about 1800. First, they developed a particularly strong and clear varnish originally for chip-carved boxes, but they found it worked well on papier-mâché—hence, the term "varnished heads." Second, they improved plaster molds to achieve a much greater level of detail in papier-mâché. Combined, these breakthroughs made possible the intricate and fashionably accurate papier-mâché doll heads that would propel the German doll industry onto the world stage.

"Because dolls always mirror their contemporary era, they reflect very well the fashion trends and hairstyles of their time," wrote Christiane Gräftnitz in her 1994 book, *Papier-mâché Dolls: 1760-1860*, which is still considered the definitive text on this style of doll. "Because fashion in the last century was socially much more important than it is today, and its dictates followed more strictly, it meant that fashion and hairstyles were copied in detail in the process of designing dolls' heads. Of course this didn't prevent dolls with less fashionable hairstyles from being sold in the provinces or overseas."

Among the most notable producers of German papier-mâché dolls were Johann Friedrich Müller (1783-1855) in Sonneberg; Johann Andreas Voit (1774-1837), first in Eisfeld and later in Hildburghausen; and Johann Daniel Kestner (1787-1858) in Walterhausen. Whereas Müller's and Kestner's factories manufactured complete dolls, Voit specialized in papier-mâché heads, which he sold to Paris, where they gained stuffed leather bodies and clothing in the latest fashions. The dolls sold widely to buyers in France, England, and America.

PARADE OF FASHIONS

Through the several decades of their popularity, German papier-mâché dolls depicted Europe's evolution

COURTESY OF THE CARMEL DOLL SHOP, CARMEL-BY-THE-SEA, CALIFORNIA

The hairstyle on this Kestner papier-mâché doll is rare, with its center part and two wings pulled back to expose the backs of her ears and terminating in a spiral bun of braids.

COURTESY OF BOWERS MUSEUM, SANTA ANA, CALIFORNIA

of fashionable clothing and coiffure, from the Empire style early in the 19th Century to the Biedermeier period closer to mid-century.

"The Empire fashion was introduced from England and the heyday of this comfortable and simple style was in the years between 1800 and 1810," Gräftnitz wrote. "This new style of clothing, its simplicity and comfort, was also an external expression of a more liberal way of thinking. In the years following 1790, Europe once again took up the themes of the Greek and Roman antique."

Women discarded their corsets in favor of the white muslin or calico "chemise" with its belt or ribbon underneath the bust and its short sleeves, depicted on many of the dolls. Consistent with the ancient Roman prototype, some early papier-mâché dolls portrayed stylish women with short curls combed around the forehead and toward the sides of the face.

With the decline of the Napoleonic Empire around 1815, dress sleeves became longer and puffier, and a ruff of gauze or lace adorned the neck, although the waistline remained high. Meanwhile, parting the hair in the middle came into vogue, often with a high plait at the back of the head, supported by a large comb. A great number of mâché-head dolls displays these hairstyles. Headwear for both dolls and women included silk turbans and tulle caps as well as, after 1812, lavish bonnets and tall hats with wide brims.

Much more radical change in couture occurred for women and the papier-mâché dolls during Europe's Biedermeier period, from 1820 to 1836. Waistlines fell to a more natural position below the ribs, and the *de rigueur* corset made its painful reappearance. Long white pantalets held with a narrow belt drew attention to the wearer's small waist. Pantalets and petticoats frequently are found on the dolls. Similarly, simplicity of hairstyle gave way to large bundles of side curls and the complexly woven Apollo's Knot, with locks piled high on the head.

"From about 1817, the development and circulation of specially prepared plaster moulds made it much easier to design and create the doll's heads of papier-mâché," Gräftnitz noted. "As well as these pressed papier-mâché heads, which mostly had brown painted hair till the 1820s, and later usually a black hairstyle, there were also papier-mâché doll's heads with artistic wigs in the style of the 1820s and 1830s."

The overwhelming majority of German papier-mâché dolls represented women. "In the first two de-

This classic German papier-mâché doll has her hair molded into an elaborate Apollo's Knot with 6 individual braids and elaborate curls extending from the sides of her head. Her dress is a sheer fabric in faded lavender and white, and she has three petticoats tied at the waist with narrow drawstring tapes. The c. 1830 doll stands 23 inches tall.

cades of the early nineteenth century there were only a few male papier-mâché dolls," Gräftnitz noted. "Between 1820 and 1830 though, this changed as the variety of the models gradually grew. But it was 1840 before this male doll made the breakthrough." Many of the male dolls wore distinctive national garb—Tyrolean and Scottish, as examples—or were dressed as soldiers or harlequins.

The market for German papier-mâché dolls dwindled in the 1840s due to developments on both sides of the Atlantic. In Germany, several prominent factories began producing china dolls. "When the factory can be identified, we are not surprised to find it is a famous one," Noble wrote. "The Royal Berlin Porcelain Factory as well as the Royal Factory of Copenhagen made a wide variety of dolls that are clearly marked."

In the United States, immigrants such as Ludwig Greiner of Philadelphia launched an American doll industry that quickly gained competitive inroads into markets in both America and Europe. Greiner in 1858 obtained the first U. S. patent for dollmaking, creating a method of reinforcing papier-mâché doll heads by means of a fabric lining.

COURTESY OF THE CARMEL DOLL SHOP, CARMEL-BY-THE-SEA, CALIFORNIA

This c. 1835 papier-mâché doll features rare brown eyes and pink cheeks. Her two-piece costume is cream chintz over simple cotton pantalets. Her carved legs are fitted with gold-painted slippers. She stands just over 12 inches tall. Her hairstyle consists of molded ringlets and painted swirls of curly locks falling directly onto the back of the shoulders, though her ears are exposed.

MANY SURVIVING DOLLS

A surprisingly large number of early-19th-Century German papier-mâché dolls have come onto the doll market in recent years. "They turn up quite frequently almost anywhere old dolls are sold," said Richmond, co-owner of the Carmel Doll Shop. "You can find them everywhere from eBay and individual dealers like ourselves to auctions and antique doll shows all over the world."

Potential collectors should take note that the papier-mâché heads are prone to cracking, crazing, and flaking. A doll's value increases according to the condition of the paint as well as the size and style of doll, most of which range between 12 to 30-plus inches in height. The leather bodies are prone to puncture and sometimes show telltale signs of extensive repair and restuffing, while the wooden limbs can suffer all sorts of damage. A doll's clothing—its quality, condition, and accuracy of era depicted—can determine much of the doll's overall value as well.

A doll Canadas and Richmond acquired from an English collector a few years ago illustrates how well some German papier-mâché dolls have weathered two centuries. Standing just over 18 inches, the circa 1825 doll features the tall Apollo's Knot hairstyle of molded braids, almost no damage to her facial paint, and indications of only

COURTESY OF THE CARMEL DOLL SHOP, CARMEL-BY-THE-SEA, CALIFORNIA

This c. 1825 German papier-mâché doll was a rare find, complete with a little trunk containing a trousseau of five dresses, various hats, and several shawls, all in excellent condition. She stands just over 18 inches and wears her hair in a classic Apollo's Knot. Two of her five ensembles are shown above.

COURTESY OF THE CARMEL DOLL SHOP, CARMEL-BY-THE-SEA, CALIFORNIA

Believed to have been produced in the factory of Daniel Kestner, this papier-mâché doll has seldom-seen apparel and bonnet. Her dress is chintz in a morning glory and wild rose pattern. The styling of the sleeves is exceptional, as is the piping on the bodice. A black ostrich plume adorns the bonnet. She stands 17 inches tall.

minor repairs to her stuffed leather body and wooden limbs.

Aside from her extraordinary condition, the doll also came with her original hide-covered trunk and trousseau. They found five pristine dresses of cotton and silk, a matching bonnet and selection of hats, plus colorful shawls and other accessories, all intact and beautifully preserved.

"She was really remarkable," Richmond recalled, noting that they fondly named her Winnie. "As collectors ourselves, maybe we should have held on to her, but she ended up going to a good home and is now in a private collection." ★

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