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Fashion History Through the Story of Dolls

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Through the Story of Dolls

Marguerite Dorr discloses Queen Isabelle as the originator of miniature dress models

A NEW mademoiselle has arrived! A stately English lady rustles up as rapidly as her fourteenth century dignity will allow her, to peek at the petite model beautifully dressed in the latest mode of the French court.

The original fashion plates were dolls dressed by the stylish Parisians and distributed to European cultural centers. They represented the newest fashions until the arrival of the fashion magazine approximately 100 years ago. Today dolls play an important role in our advertising.

The use of dolls originated when Queen Isabelle of France sent several dolls to the English court as a gift. She may have been showing off the grandeur of her own court styles, but the Londoners certainly welcomed the fashion hints. Thereafter the monthly arrival of the jointed puppets from Paris meant trying days for the overworked dressmakers.

Noble Venetian dames crowded around the annual exhibit on Ascension Day in the fashionable Piazza of St. Mark to glimpse "the toilette of the year" direct from Paris. The reputation of the style of the French court was growing.

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, these models became indispensable in illustrating the latest coiffures, jewelry and millinery, as well as gowns. Life size models were introduced but failed to rival the popularity of the dolls.

The first link between Paris fashions and the American dressmaker was the "Fashion Baby." A small eighteenth century doll, perfectly dressed in the latest mode de Paris, she was quite perfect—from kid slippers to coiffure. From about 1750 up to the Civil War she was sent over to America to live her life in some small settlement. She was rented out by her owner to every house in town, and her wardrobe was excitedly copied by the fashion loving colonists. The dolls even found a place in the mail packets of the frontier settlers.

Little Susan and Mary Anne of 1829 weren't far behind today's daughters. They played with paper dolls that wore gaily painted dresses "just like the ones Mother wore." A few have survived the wear of eager fingers to record period styles with their aristocratic wooden and wax sisters.

Six small beauties pose in the showcases in the east wing of Home Economics Building. Ten years ago an Iowa State class in history of costume dressed these dolls in typical gowns from 1400 to 1800. A long black veil trails down over Anne of Brittany's embroidered gold taffeta gown with wide cuffs and hem of crinoline in contrast to the "hennin" or tower topping the head of the fifteenth century lady.

The superior air flaunted by Marie Antoinette is caught in her massive white wig and elaborate peach taffeta skirt billowing out to emphasize her tiny waist. Green velvet was paneled with embroidered white silk for Mary, Queen of Scots.

But all dolls aren't relegated to museums in the modern fashion world. A little girl patiently cutting and stitching a new dress for her doll may be the outstanding designer of tomorrow. As a designer, she'll continue to drape her materials around a doll for her new creations.

The advantage of working with smaller samples of material and leaving the work unfinished for a time makes small dolls popular in schools of designing. They are made of plastic material easy to stick pins into and have jointed arms for different poses.

Have you noticed the miniature twentieth century women reigning over pattern departments? The number of the pattern, the yardage and expense are all on placards by them. Pattern companies have found this method successful in promoting new styles.

Competing with these are dolls in the dress department. They are supported by rods from the base and have jointed bodies so they can pose for anything from bathing suits to formal gowns. Lingerie and corset companies also use doll models in advertising.