

A PIECE OF THE PAST: THE KEWPIE DOLL

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In America, people eagerly anticipate new and improved innovations, but suddenly the new becomes the old, and the old becomes forgotten. As a result of this repetitious cycle, companies are engaging in competition by creating endless options for every consumer. Fast food restaurants flash signs that read “over one million drink combinations,” car dealerships are filled with every shape and size car, and stores such as Toys-R-Us categorize and stack each shelf with the latest toys that compete for a child’s interest. Today, a brand or item worthy of a legacy is often unexpected, such as a great work of art that happened by accident. The Museum of American Architecture and Decorative Arts contains the Kewpie Doll, a popular artifact whose price tags exist, but more than that carries an irreplaceable legacy. The Kewpie Doll is represented within the evolution of dolls; it stands as an icon for purity, and an example of transformation of tradition that took place in the 20th century.

The spectacular journey of Kewpie Dolls began in 1909, yet they are a part of the unique evolution of dolls that dates back to prehistoric times. “Mischievous, marvelous Kewpie dolls have been around for nearly 100 years now” and “they’re a reminder that the dolls have a rich history that began well before most of today’s doll collectors were even born” (Fitzgerald 37). Rose O’Neill is the designer of the Kewpie. She first set out to draw these adorable babies into the likeness of cupid, with little blue wings, extra chubby cheeks, and a top knot. Her drawings quickly transformed into a popular comic character. Shortly after receiving positive feedback, Rose was compelled by requests which led to the creation of the Kewpie Kutout, a paper cut out doll. As interest in these adorable dolls continued to spark, Rose partnered in 1912 with Joseph Kallus to create the very first Kewpie Doll. It was manufactured out of a type of porcelain called bisque. Once the doll launched from the factory it quickly began to ignite the hearts of children, and the Kewpie craze had officially begun. “It took 30 German factories to keep up with the demand in the United States where Kewpie debuted in 1913 under the distribution of George Borgfeldt. Five million Kewpie dolls were sold over the next year” (Fitzgerald 37). To accommodate the customers Rose created a variety of Kewpie models with different occupations and ethnicities. Over the course of time, the Kewpie Dolls were produced in different sizes and materials such as bisque, celluloid, plastic, and rubber. Children everywhere were begging for Kewpie Dolls. This fad grew into a lasting success that was sweeping the nation, factories had to work overtime due to the high demand, and soon they were producing items such as salt and pepper shakers, vases, greeting cards, and even products such as Jell-O exclaimed a phrase that said “Jell-O and The Kewpies.. America’s Most Famous Dessert.”

The Kewpie Dolls represented more than a toy; they were seen as an example of goodness and purity. This doll was very real to Rose, so real that Rose claimed to have dreamed it into existence. “They were all over my room,” she said breathlessly, “On my bed, and one perched on my hand. I awoke seeing them everywhere” (Currie 70). As this dream explained the inspiration for a design, Rose attributed many of the doll’s features to memories of her deceased baby brother whom she used to draw pictures of. It is not surprising that “these creations have a

naïve sensuality of very small children and every serious doll collector has at least one of the adorable nostalgic reminders of a more innocent time” (Smith 25). Rose never would have imagined that this round, fairy-like baby, with wide eyes, an irresistible smile, and a button nose, would soon become an era’s symbol for pop culture and treasured by millions of doll-lovers. Many people today have their own interpretation for the name Kewpie Doll. For example, “In the automotive industry, the name “Kewpie Doll” is an old time parlance for a seemingly innocent customer, which in reality, is trying to deceive the business owner” (Giammalvo 140). The unmistakable look of the Kewpie Doll has made an impression on society and become a look associated with innocence, even in an automotive shop.

Rose O’Neill was an artistic individual who had talent woven into her genes. As a woman and a young artist in the late 19th century people underestimated her ability to succeed. Leading up to the creation that would change her life, Rose embraced an artistic lifestyle. In her teenage years she traveled seeking to study art. She even won a drawing contest at age thirteen in which the judges were skeptical due to her sophisticated art. Women faced many challenges in order to be recognized by society, but “the combination of [Rose’s] portfolio and personality convinced editors to take a chance, and her work, signed only with initials to disguise the fact that she was female, soon began appearing in national magazines such as *Life*, *Puck*, and *Harper’s Monthly*”(Currie 24). Rose stopped playing the background and was acknowledged for her fine creativity after creating 20th century’s most beloved and famous doll, the Kewpie Doll. Rose was just one individual who helped pave the way for transformation of the patriarchal social, political, and cultural sphere. The acknowledgement of women like Rose contributed to redefining roles of many women in the near future. Today, her work of art is displayed in many museums including a Kewpie Museum at her old Bonniebrook home in Missouri.

The legacy of the Kewpie Doll has not ended; in fact these dolls are collectors’ items all over the world. This American sensation has lasted for almost a century and the last doll was produced in the early 2000s. The Kewpie Doll in the Museum of American Architecture and Decorative Arts is one of the original bisque or celluloid dolls from Germany as identified by its materials. The memory of this chubby, top knot, cupid doll represents a doll that has evolved over the course of time, but its significance has stayed the same in the hearts of many.

Works Cited

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