

Contemporary Collectibles: Half a doll is better than some

by *Linda_Rosenkrantz*

Not all dolls were made as children's playthings. There is one category, known as half-dolls, made primarily in the first three decades of the 20th century, that were used by ladies of the period to form decorative tops for various items on their dressing tables - pincushions, jewelry or cosmetic boxes, perfume bottles, brushes and powder puffs, as well as candy containers, tea cozies and lamps.

Also known as pincushion dolls, they were generally molded from the waist up, usually with unjointed heads and arms, of glazed china or bisque, and sometimes composition or, less frequently, papier mache, wax or other materials. They ranged in size from about 2 to 6 inches tall, though some are smaller and there are also a few larger specimens. Depending on their date of manufacture, the ladies might represent typical Victorian or flapper types.

Most of the female forms had a series of holes through which they were sewn firmly onto a pincushion or other bases that were elaborately decorated, serving as the skirt of their gowns. The scarcest and most valuable examples are those with arms molded away from the body, which were more susceptible to breakage.

Some of the finest pincushion dolls were made by well-known European - particularly German - firms. Among them are F&W Goebel, founded in Rodental, Germany, in 1871, producing, among others, the Hummel figurines based on the artwork of Franciscan nun Maria Innocentia Hummel; Dressel, Kister & Co., makers of some elaborate and sought-after dolls; Ernst, Bohne & Sohne; Hertwig & Co., a prolific producer of bisque and china dolls; KPM, a mark originally used by Konigliche Porzellan Manufaktur of Berlin; and Gebruder Heubach, another German company that specialized in making bisque doll heads and piano babies. The majority of half-dolls are unmarked except for country of origin, although some firms like Goebel did sometimes mark theirs.

In terms of value, several factors will determine price. One, obviously, is the quality of the painting - crudely painted examples from Japan and Germany have little worth - and the modeling of clothing and hair. Another is the complexity of the mold used to make the dolls and the position of the arms, with those featuring "open arms" or "arms away" - some defined space between the arms and the torso - far more desirable, as are particularly elaborate clothing details, such as hats, ruffles and feathers.

Even more collectible are those dolls holding interesting objects, such as fans, books, parrots, puppies or other animals, flowers, writing instruments, letters and pads, dolls, baskets and trays with pots and cups - particularly the one known as La Belle Chocolatier, dressed as a Viennese serving girl.

Denise Van Patten, in her 2005 "Official Price Guide to Dolls," cites an Ernest Bohne & Sohne doll with an elaborate blouse and hat that fetched \$5,000 at auction, and values another porcelain half-doll in a fancy painted blouse at \$4,250.

Here are some more representative prices as reported in the 2008 edition of the ever-useful "Schroeder's Antiques Price Guide" - as you can see, the position of the arms is a key factor (two arms away are better than one), as well as the quality of the face painting:

- Arms away, marked by maker or mold number, 8 inches, in excellent condition: \$400.

- Arms away, marked by maker or mold number, 4 inches, very good condition: \$150.

- Arms away, holding item, 6 inches, very good condition: \$200.

- Arms in, decor bodice, necklace, 3 inches, excellent condition: \$125.

- Jointed shoulders, china or bisque, molded hair, 7 inches, excellent condition: \$200.

- Man or child, 4 inches, excellent condition: \$120.

- Arms away, china or bisque, bald head with wig, 4 inches, very good condition: \$105.

Linda Rosenkrantz has edited Auction magazine and authored 15 books, including "The Baby Name Bible" (St. Martin's Press; www.babynamebible.com). She cannot answer letters personally.

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