

Contemporary Collectibles: Black dolls have a long history beyond Malia and Sasha

by *Linda_Rosenkrantz*

In light of the recent fuss over the merchandising of two dolls that just happened to be named Marvelous Malia and Sweet Sasha – much to the displeasure of the first lady – and February being Black History month, it seems like a good moment to look back at the extensive and rich history of African-American dolls.

The earliest American black dolls – and certainly those played with by slave children – were handmade and quite crude, constructed from any available material – bodies from cloth, wood, cornhusks, chicken bones and even bottles filled with sand, and heads made from a sock or a nut. Rag dolls fashioned from scraps of cloth were the most prevalent, and were dressed in calico, muslin, or feedbag cloth. Many were made to resemble mammies, often holding white babies.

In the pre-Civil War period, manufactured dolls' heads were made from papier mache, and then attached to bodies handmade of wood, leather or cloth, with carved wooden arms and legs. These dolls were painted black and had exaggerated stereotypical features and molded kinky hair. The key producer was an African-American doll maker from Macon, Ga., named Leo Moss. One particular favorite doll that began in the antebellum South, is the Topsy Turvy – actually two dolls in one, black at one end and white on the other. Made into the 1940s, they can be found in rubber, plastic, celluloid and composition.

China dolls appeared in the mid-19th century, both Frozen Charlottes – made completely of porcelain-glazed ceramic – and separate china heads, which were sold separately and then attached to handmade bodies. Toward the end of the century, china dolls began to be replaced by bisque, or unglazed china, allowing for a more subtle range of skin tones and hairstyles, and less exaggerated features. German and French doll makers, who supplied most of the dolls for the U.S. market, produced black dolls as far back as the early 1800s, some as elegantly attired house servants, while others were merely black-complexioned white dolls. German firms Simon & Halbig and Armand Merseille produced fine bisque-headed black baby and young girl dolls in limited quantities, and these are extremely rare and valuable today.

After the Civil War, Topsy, Mammy and Aunt Jemima rag dolls remained popular, but by the late 1920s composition had become the material of choice, still with Aunt Jemima the No. 1 favorite. The 1924 Sears and Roebuck Co. catalog described one as "finished in pretty chocolate color." In the late 1940s, three new doll-making materials emerged: Magic Skin latex (rubber), hard plastic, and vinyl – which continues to be the prime material today. One popular vinyl example was Amosandra, named for the baby on the "Amos 'n' Andy" radio show.

Renowned doll maker Madame Alexander made two black dolls named Hilda and Cynthia – both using a Margaret O'Brien face mold. In the 1950s, white civil rights activist Sara Lee Creech led an effort to produce more authentic African-American dolls, in which she was joined by Eleanor Roosevelt and other notables who convinced Ideal Toy Co. to make its Sara Lee the first ethnically-correct mass-produced doll in America; in 1968, Remco produced a whole line of lifelike black dolls, such as Walking Winnie and Tippy Tumbles. Since

then, there has been an explosion of African-American dolls, including Cabbage Patch Kids, and an extended family of black Barbie dolls.

RECOMMENDED REFERENCE

COLLECTIBLE AFRICAN AMERICAN DOLLS by Yvonne H. Ellis (Collector Books, \$29.95) An identification and value guide, this book covers the spectrum of black dolls, with some early cornhusk and papier-mache examples, but focusing more on the modern era. There is an informative history of the genre, listings by material and manufacturer, and a section on paper dolls. Fully illustrated, with a value given for each doll.

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