

‘LIKENESS TO A JOINED DOLL’

A SET OF 18TH-CENTURY ENGLISH FEMALE DOLL’S CLOTHES, c.1770

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This set of dolls clothes, comprising a rust-colored silk taffeta *robe à la française* and matching petticoat, white cotton pockets and fully boned stays, was sold by the Cora Ginsburg Gallery, New York to the Daughters of the American Revolution Museum, Washington D.C. in 2002 (Figures 1-3). According to the Gallery it came from an English collection, hence the attribution of the pieces to England. Made for a doll approximately 12 to 14 inches tall, the set was constructed in exactly the same manner as actual clothing of the period. The open robe is trimmed with self-fabric ruched robings in straight rows around the neck and down each side of the skirt, with single-tiered cuffs on the elbow-length sleeves accented with a bow. This style of trim dates the piece to the 1770s, since the scrolling robings of the previous decade had fallen from favor. One wide flounce runs around the center of the petticoat, while a thinner band of ruching accents the hem.

While many dolls survive in clothes made of brocaded silks, crafting a doll’s dress out of plain textiles ensured that the illusion of miniaturization was not disturbed by the incongruity of scale that accompanies figured examples, as in a similar dress and petticoat of pink taffeta in the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. The original doll would no doubt have worn this ensemble over a hooped petticoat and chemise, along with the stays and self-stripped cotton pockets on a linen tape that remained with the gown, as a slightly earlier doll in the Manchester

Art Gallery that retains its yellow linen hoop does. It is impossible to say whether the gown was created at home or commercially by a doll vendor, though the sophistication of its manufacture – the bodice is lined in linen, as in corresponding full-sized clothing – indicates that it may have been made by a professional.

Doll's stays from this period are rare, especially those that replicate exactly full-sized versions. This example is made from layers of fine and coarse linen with tiny strips of baleen inserted into channels, a broad curved top edge and slightly peaked waist with five holes at the back for lacing. The edges are bound with linen tape, another indication of the quality of this ensemble. Of course, the doll that wore these stays did not really need them. The wooden dolls popular in eighteenth-century England were carved to represent the shape of the dressed body, as if they were already wearing corsets, or stays. They thus naturalized the firm, inverted, cone-like torso with high peaked breasts and non-flexing waist of the dolls, as seen in an example from the Victoria & Albert Museum dating to the first quarter of the century. An essay, attributed to a physician and printed in the Dublin periodical *Walker's Hibernian Magazine* in May 1786, exhorted readers to dismiss tight lacing as well as the wearing of stays among children, explicitly comparing women's deformed bodies to those of dolls: 'The naked Africans have a great resemblance to the statues of Venus carved in the ancient manner; whereas our own females have a great likeness to a joined doll'.¹ Dolls' arms could be made of stuffed rag, which was then attached to the wooden body with nails or wire, or jointed in. Many were then decorated with paint and gesso to create the facial features and visible skin on the lower arms and torso. Georgian dolls frequently feature large horizontally attenuated eyes (often inset with black glass), thin eyebrows, rouged cheeks, and tiny red mouths.

¹ "On the Inconveniences and Disorders arising from Straight-Lacing in Stays," *Walker's Hibernian Magazine, Or, Compendium of Entertaining Knowledge*, May 1786, 258.

McKendrick, Brewer and Plumb, in their classic *The Birth of a Consumer Society* (1982) describe a shift in the speed of fashion diffusion, from the role of the French fashion doll in the first part of the eighteenth century which, they argued, served the court and the elites, to an accelerating fashion industry ‘controlled by business’.² They go on to argue that ‘in the last thirty years of the eighteenth century the fashion plate and the fashion magazine offered wholly new means of spreading fashionable contagions’.³ Earlier, in his classic work on dolls and puppets, the German researcher Max von Boehn had given a special role to the fashion doll in terms of the dissemination of fashion.

At a time when as yet the press was non-existent, long before the invention of such mechanical means of reproduction as the woodcut and copperplate, to the doll was given the task of popularizing French fashions abroad.⁴

Descriptions of the dolls sent between Renaissance courts suggest that such dolls were quite large, at human scale, and must have resembled artist’s lay figures.⁵ The surviving eighteenth-century dolls are relatively small. The eighteenth century might have seen a shift from the life-sized dolls described as gifted between the Renaissance courts to the smaller dolls associated with play and Rousseau’s ideas regarding an education for girls.

² Neil McKendrick, John Brewer, and John Harold Plumb, *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-century England* (Bloomington, 1982), p. 43.

³ McKendrick et al., *The Birth of a Consumer Society*, p. 49.

⁴ Max von Boehn, *Puppen und Puppenspiele*, Josephine Nicoll (trans.), (New York, 1966), p. 136.

⁵ See Yassana C. Croizat, “‘Living Dolls’: François I Dresses His Women”, *Renaissance Quarterly*, 60/1 (2007), pp. 94-130.

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