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Cloth Settlers: Fine Art Dolls Populating the Textile Art Landscape

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I’d like to introduce my subject, contemporary American cloth art dolls, with images of my own work (Figs.1-4) and a few words about myself. I’ve been a professional doll artist for 17 years. Since the age of 2, my main interest has been making art. As a child, I made drawings and paintings, toys, paper dolls, puppets, and doll clothes. I earned a BFA at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, with a major in printmaking. I worked as an illustrator for more than 20 years, and then I switched to dollmaking as my mode of artistic expression. This presentation was part of a symposium session entitled “Objects of Desire”, which fits perfectly with my view of art dolls. I find dolls of cloth to be particularly seductive. The textile qualities of softness, texture, and warmth give us an emotional connection with them that isn’t as readily offered by dolls made of hard mediums.

Textiles have been essential to human beings since ancient times, and textile scraps have long been used to create dolls. One very early cloth doll example still in existence is an ancient Roman doll in the British Museum. Made of linen, it was found in Egypt and was probably made between the 1st and 5th centuries A.D. The dollmaking impulse has been indulged in almost every recorded era and culture, except when beliefs prohibited the making of idols. Dolls have had many roles. Being toys for children is now their most widely accepted purpose, but they’ve also performed religious, ritualistic, educational, and therapeutic duties, and even have been created purely for art.
As Europeans settled America in the 17th and 18th centuries, different traditions were combining to produce distinct American art forms. Certain styles of rag dolls emerged from a culture where materials were scarce, and every precious scrap was used purposefully. Primitive handmade stuffed dolls sewn by settlers, pioneers, and slaves are the heritage of today’s American cloth dollmakers. Some early rag dolls were just an undressed human shape; others wore carefully constructed finery. Faces were drawn, painted, appliqué’d, embroidered, or created with buttons and beads.

After 18th century inventions allowed production mills to make cheaper textiles, cottage industries arose creating cloth dolls in larger numbers and for sale to consumers. In the mid 1800s Izannah Walker took cloth dolls beyond homemade primitives. She glued fabric over a sculpted mask to make a head that looked more like European porcelain dolls, but was cheaper and unbreakable. Bodies were still stitched and stuffed. The dolls were painted in a style similar to early American Folk Art paintings. Martha Chase was another cloth dollmaker who was successful in this type of production. On her dolls the cloth skin is practically obscured by layers of paint.

Factory production became the source for most dolls in America, but during the Second World War, resources were scarce and factories were busy producing war goods, so more toys and dolls were again handmade at home. Out of these circumstances arose some celebrated doll artists and collectors interested in their work, and the modern art doll movement began.

Artists worked in relative isolation until they started to meet at collectors’ conventions, and then in 1963 a small group of doll artists led by Helen Bullard, a wooden-doll carver from Tennessee, formed the National Institute of American Doll Artists (NIADA). Their goals were to exhibit their work alongside that of other dollmakers with high aesthetic standards, and to acquaint the public with dolls made as art. Since its beginning, NIADA, now a prestigious international organization, has elected 165 members based on the high artistic quality of their work. The cloth doll artists whose work follows have all received that honor.

Figures 5 – 9, from the left. These pictures describe my method of head construction, and serve as an example of one way that dolls can be made entirely of textiles and fiber:

Figure 5. The understructure is a basic, seamed head shape, made from cotton and hemp knit fleece, stuffed with wool.

Figure 6. The shape is refined with needle sculpting, pulling stitches in and knotting them at the back of the head.

Figure 7. The face is covered with a cotton knit “skin” which is tacked down in strategic places.

Figure 8. The features are embroidered.

Figure 9. The skin fabric on the back of the head is sewn closed, a cap is constructed from the hair fabric and stitched onto the head, and quilted ears are sewn on. Figure 1 is this doll completed.

Images by author.
Figure 10, left. Little Women by Halle Blakely who first made cloth dolls in the Depression years. During World War II she started to sell her work through major stores. Image from artist.

Figure 11, right. In the early 40s, Gwen Flather developed a style of making cloth dolls, born out of the skill of darning socks. This is her Grandma Moses. Her needle-sculpted figures embody the humor and warmth of personality she was known for. Image by author.

Figures 12-14. Dorothy Heizer began making cloth dolls in the 1920s and was already an expert with important commissions by the time World War II started. She made meticulously costumed portraits of personalities from many eras, including a celebrated series of queens, many of which are now in the Smithsonian Institution. Dorothy’s techniques allowed her to produce detailed cloth figures in a small scale of 10 to 12 inches. A copper wire skeleton was wrapped with cotton, then covered with fine cotton crepe skin. Images by author.
Figure 15, left. Bernard Ravca was well known for his needle-sculpted dolls in his native France and took them to the New York World’s Fair in 1939. He stayed in the USA after France fell to the Nazis. He married an American doll artist, Frances Diecks, and then they worked together on their dolls. Image by author.

Figure 16, right. Mirren Barrie also made needle-sculpted dolls with a simple, straightforward style and great attention to costume detailing. She liked to do historical figures, such as this colonial child. Image by author.

Figure 17, left. Ellen Turner lived in Appalachia and her serene dolls depicted the people she was surrounded by. Even though her methods and style were simple and unadorned, she was able to portray the warmth of personalities and relationships. Image by W. Don Smith.

Figures 18-19, center and right. The stylized shapes and basic stuffed cloth construction of Pamela Cowart-Rickman’s dolls relate back to the simple forms of the early American primitives. Their real interest lies in her layered surface design, with its delicate detail and allegories. She uses multiple techniques, such as drawing, painting, stamping and dying to decorate plain cloth. Image 18 by author. Image 19 from artist.
Figures 20-21. Lenore Davis’ work also relies on surface design. Painting defines costumes, patterns, colors, and faces, bringing the stuffed forms made of plain linen to life. She drafted complicated patterns to make the body shapes and poses needed to convey the gestures and the essence of movement she wanted to express.

Images by W. Don Smith.

Figures 22-25. Donna May Robinson also paints on stuffed cloth forms. The sculptural appearance of her faces is achieved by oil painting on a perfectly flat stuffed cloth face. Her dolls have jointed cloth bodies, and they wear real children’s shoes and meticulously constructed vintage-looking outfits. Donna May is well known for her goofy looking kids, but she also does other dolls she calls her “fantasy figures.”

Images by Lloyd Wilson.
The cloth doll artist of today whose work strikes the most startling contrast with the early primitive dolls is Lisa Lichtenfels. She has developed a soft-sculpture technique that allows her to achieve an unsurpassed level of anatomical description while maintaining the allure of the textile medium. Images by the artist.

Lisa works from the inside out. She first creates full-scale drawings of the figure and its pose from different angles. She makes a wire skeleton and sews on muscle forms made of fiber batting. She then meticulously stitches on layers of nylon stocking fabric, further refining body shapes with stitching. She creates lifelike skin coloring by stretching layers of different colors of fabric over one another. The head is created with a Styrofoam skull covered with batting. The eyes are painted marbles. Coloring is added with pastels to define the face. The lips are a different skin color stitched on separately. Images by the artist.
Figures 30-32. Jo-Ellen Trilling also works from the inside out, making wire armatures and sewing on stuffing and fabric, stitching it to shape. Her dolls’ surfaces are generally hardened by glues and paints. She often expresses her quirky humor with animals playing human-like roles. Even props and furniture are made of wire, fabric and paint, giving them a kind of surreal appearance. Images by the artist.

Figures 33-35. Reina Mia Brill knits fabric with colored wire on antique knitting machines, and uses it on the surface of her dolls. Her early figures were constructed by wrapping stuffing and cloth around an armature, then stitching on the knitted wire. Sometimes different colored layers of wire fabric are needed to get the desired effect. In more recent work, she has made the forms from fired ceramic paper clay. She paints the sculpts and then applies the wire fabric over the surface. Images by D. James Dee.
Figures 36-38. Leslie Molen glues Japanese chirimen silk fabric skin over a facemask sculpted from air-drying stone clay. Her bodies are stuffed cloth with wire and copper tube armatures. Eyes are painted with acrylics and coated with a glossy glaze. Subtle coloring is brushed onto the face with pastels. Leslie likes to make dolls of Chinese children. She has made a series of Story Dolls inspired by hats with folk story themes that Chinese mothers make for their children. Images from artist.

Figures 39-41. Antonette Cely also glues fabric skin to a sculpted paper clay facemask. She is known for her elaborately seamed, realistically shaped bodies. Many of her dolls have had wonderfully designed and fitted period costumes. Images by Don B. Cely.
Figures 42-43. Charlene Westling thought of her dolls as 3-dimensional oil paintings. She made heads, hands and feet from molded composition and covered them with fabric to give them a canvas-like texture. Then she painted the parts with oils and attached them to a stuffed cloth body. Image 42 by author, image 43 from artist.

Figures 44-46. Lesley Keeble uses silk cloth over a sculpted paper clay head. She dyes the skin fabric and the linen hair fiber with natural dyes. Her firmly stuffed cloth bodies have wooden dowels in the legs. She draws facial details on the silk with Prismacolor pencils with a bit of paint for the eyes. Images by Robert Batey.
Figures 47-49. Deborah Pope makes needle-felted dolls, producing all-fiber, detailed sculpts. Her technique involves both wet felting and shaping with a barbed felting needle. She adds color to the felted skin by brushing on pastels. Images 47, 48 by Robert Batey, 49 by Lloyd Wilson.

Figures 50-51, left. Maggie Iacono uses felt in a different way. She presses flat felt with a stiffener added into molds for the faces. This technique allows her to make small editions of her work. Her bodies are sewn and stuffed felt with ball joints. Images by the artist.

Figures 52-53, right. R. John Wright uses a similar technique of pressing felt into molds and stiffening it. His dolls are made in editions with the help of skilled artisans. His work has nostalgic, timeless appeal. He finds inspiration in storybooks and nursery rhymes. Image 52 from artist, image 53 by author.