

# DOLLS OF THE NORTH AMERICAN INDIANS



MO

Eskimo doll from  
Baffin Island, Canada.



## OF THE AMERICAN INDIANS

A great variety of materials was used for the doll figures. These were usually indigenous to the area where the dolls were made. Clothing was often in imitation of the dress of the people of the region. Dr. Hough feels that one value of the doll is to show tribal custom and fancy. He states: "A collection of Indian dolls reflects the decay of Indian customs and costumes. First we have them clothed in buckskin, then comes the encroachment of calico and blanket-stuff made upon Indian styles, then ribbon and gewgaws appear." It is obvious that dolls with cloth and beads for dress or features date after the white man.

The discussion of individual doll types and their uses which follows is arranged by geographical divisions of North America.

### *Eskimo and the Canadian Indian Area.*

Dr. Walter Hough believes that the Eskimo may be unique in the possession of dolls in their prehistoric culture. Doll figures have been found in the frozen ground where early villages existed. The Eskimos of the lower Yukon have a story of the origin of doll making: "According to this story there was a doll being who cut the gut skin that formerly closed holes in the sky and thus let the beneficent wind in upon the earth. This doll, which walked upon the 'path of light' as the Eskimo call the 'milky way,' performed many good deeds for the people before it died. The grateful Eskimo then made the first wonder-working doll heroine."

It is generally felt that the dolls of the MacKenzie area were probably assimilated from neighboring Eskimo. Among the Montagnais and Naskape tribes of northern Canada, little girls were given dolls and encouraged to make clothes for them, according to Diamond Jenness in *Indians of Canada* (National Museum of Canada, Bulletin 65). In these regions, dolls were also used as charms, amulets and fetishes. The raw materials of the environment were utilized in their manufacture. In the extreme northern areas they were carved from ivory, walrus tusks and mammoth teeth, and were dressed in furs. Farther south, wood was also used for the figures.

Every child owned many of the simplest types made from carved ivory, and from one to three inches tall. Though usually these small dolls were not dressed, some were adorned with strings of beads or little strips of cloth. When not used for play, they were kept in bags made of walrus intestines. The figures were crude, perhaps with no face, but they showed interesting and intricate details of carving. If a face was present, the sex of the doll was indicated by the mouth. The female mouth was turned downward and the male's, up. Often a group of dolls represented a whole family, including a creeping baby and the mother, probably with well-developed breasts or signs of pregnancy. Babies were carved with feet apart so they could be carried on the mother's back astride the neck as is the custom in this region. There were also dolls made from driftwood, larger but not as elaborate as the ivory figures.

Little girls on St. Lawrence Island are often on the alert for mice which they skin in order to use the skin for dolls. They also use seal, dog and cormorant skins which are stuffed with straw and sewed. In some places weasels are cleaned and stuffed with straw and rags and sewed, with beads added to replace the eyes. Sometimes children use scraps of cloth, such as percale, muslin, gunny-sacking or flannel, for stuffed dolls. These are very crude with no features at all, or a semblance of a face embroidered in thread. Many of these dolls are greasy from the blubber the children try to feed them.

Dolls and doll figures are also made for museum and sale items. Much ingenuity is used with these figures. The heads are of hand-carved ivory or wood with enough shoulder on which to hang clothes. Heads are highly polished, some are carved to represent hair, and a few have hats. The ears may have loops to which earrings may be attached. Garments are typical of the region from which the dolls originate. One doll, described as having legs of gingham, was stuffed with rags, and the arms formed from the skin of ground squirrel. It was dressed in a mouse skin parka belted with a strip of blue cloth to which fish bones were sewn. There was a white leather neckpiece, and a part of the tip of an ermine tail hung down the back. The mukluks were salmon-skin and had a top of ptarmigan foot feathers.

John Murdoch says that dolls were not popular with little girls in the Point Barrow region in the late 1880's. The children were never seen playing with them. These people made mechanical dolls with suits of miniature clothing for sale. In the *Ethnological Results of the Point Barrow Expedition* (Ninth Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology) he describes some of them. One was a mechanical drum player dressed in deerskin with legs outstretched and a drum and sticks in the hands. By pressing the arms, the doll was made to beat the drum. This figure was made from a single piece of wood. A knot with two branches made the legs. It was eleven and a half inches tall. It is possible that it was used as a fetish. A mechanical doll in a kayak also shows a great deal of ingenuity. The kayak was twenty-nine inches long and carved from a single block of wood. The figure had no legs and fitted into the cockpit. The head was separate and mounted on a long slender pivot which fitted into a hole in the neck just loosely enough to allow it to turn easily. It was dressed in a hood of seal gut. The arms were whalebone and, by means of strings, the doll could be made to paddle and turn his head from side to side.

on their kayaks. This is similar to the custom of many tribes of the  
ng Strait region who put their faith in small dolls.

ome of the Eskimos of Hudson Bay had an amulet of a headless doll  
h was worn to ward off attacks of evil spirits. Origin of this custom  
what became of the head are lost among the early myths of the tribe.  
is area another fetish of doll form was one made in the image of  
a famous hunter chief. This was fastened to the top of a pole by the  
nan in hopes of improving hunting. On the east shore of Hudson Bay,  
eer wooden doll without joints is hung on the belt, face outward, and  
posed to ward off any influences detrimental to the conjurer.

ie Doll Book, by Laura B. Starr, mentions dolls, rudely carved of wood,  
e by the Iroquois Indians at Caugnawaga across the St. Lawrence  
from Montreal. One tiny one is on snowshoes and wrapped, head  
all, in a blanket with a rope girdle about the waist. Dolls, even more  
ely carved, are found in the nearby Labrador region.

modern Eskimo dolls are dressed in felt and pieces of fur. Often card-  
d faces or ones of buckram are stitched into the fur hood. If made of  
l, features are carved; otherwise, they are painted. Some modern  
for the children are imported from the United States and Canada.

#### Woodland Area

veral dolls of distinct character are found in the eastern Woodland  
the corn husk and the corncob being the most famous. As mentioned  
e, ethnologists disagree on the origin of these homemade dolls.



Details of Iroquois dolls  
made from corn husks; New York.

Marrie A. Lyford, in *Iroquois Crafts* (U. S. Indian Service. Indian Hand-crafts, 6), suggests that the Penobscot Indians were the first to use them and that other tribes adopted the idea. The white children then copied the custom from the Indians, and where corn grew these dolls became very popular.

Among the Iroquois dolls made from corn husks range in style from simple designs to complex braiding of the corn husks for arms and legs. General directions for making a corn-husk doll are described by Arthur Barker in *Iroquois Uses of Maize and Other Food Plants* (New York State Museum Bulletin 144):

Dolls are made by folding the husk in a pestlelike form for the neck and body. Room is left for the head and neck and the central core is pierced to allow a wisp of husk to be pulled through to be braided into arms. The lower portion is pierced in the same way and the husk for the legs pulled through. Husks are rolled around the upper portion of the neck and the head is formed. Husks now are placed over the back of the neck and carried diagonally across the chest from either side. The same process is repeated from the front and the husks drawn diagonally across the back. This produces the body and shoulders. The legs are then braided or neatly rolled into shape, wound spirally with twine, and tied tightly at the ankles. The foot is then bent forward at right angles to the leg and wound into shape. The arms undergo a similar process, but no attempt is made to simulate hands. The head and body are now ready for covering. For the head the wide husks are held upward against the top of the head and a string passed around them. The husks are then bent downward and the string tightened. This leaves a little circular opening at the top of the head. The head cover husks are drawn tightly over the form and tied at the neck, which is afterward wound neatly with a smooth husk. More diagonal pieces are placed over the shoulders fore and aft and drawn tightly down to the waist. A wide band is then drawn around the waist and tied. The doll is now ready for corn silk hair which will be sewn on and its face may be painted. The dolls are sometimes dressed in husk clothing, but more often cloth or skin is used. Dolls are dressed as warriors or women and are given all the accessories, bows, tomahawks, baby boards or paddles, as the sex may require.

Some corn-husk dolls were made for use in certain medicine rites. These were about four inches in length and cast away to carry with them the malady involved.

A dried apple was used for the face of some corn-husk dolls made to represent a spirit, called "Loose Feet," who granted wishes to little children. Other apple-face dolls were made with wooden bodies. To make one, an apple that was slightly green was peeled and cored. On one side it was molded with the hands to produce a face, and then hung up to dry slowly. Each day as the apple dried, the features were further shaped until they resembled a human face. A small block of wood was carved for the shoulders, above which was left a projection big enough to fit into the hole from which the core of the apple had been removed. The apple head was attached, as on a peg, thus connecting it to the body.

One Oneida doll had a body from a corncob, the face and hands were covered with the husk of an ear of red corn, the features were indicated with pencil, and on the head was what might pass for a small war bonnet of feathers.

The Iroquois also made a doll of buckskin and dressed it in the same material, profusely decorating it with beads. The hair of this type is often made of horsehair which is plaited in two long braids.



Group of Chippewa  
medicine dolls.

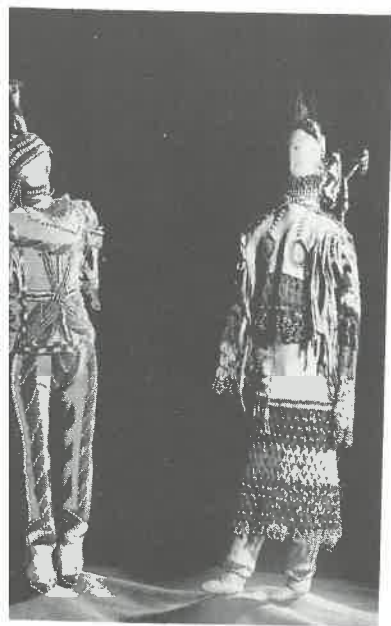
ains Area

There is some conflict as to whether tribes on the Plains originally had dolls. Max Von Boehn says that the Cheyenne, Sioux and Apache are ignorant of the toy doll. However, the Dakota and Blackfeet tribes made dolls of leather and embroidered them with glass beads in historic times. The faces of these dolls were often grotesque. There are available several descriptions of dolls made by the Cheyenne and several photos of an Apache doll. Though lack of dates hampers a conclusive answer to these arguments, the fact that glass beads and cloth materials were used on these figures dates them to post-white contact. Therefore, it is possible that some tribes did not have toy dolls before white contact, but adapted them soon after. Even in the early years of white contact, dolls were made by the Indians as sale items. It is difficult to tell which were made for sale and which for toys.

George Bird Grinnel, in *Cheyenne Indians*, tells that the Cheyenne girl had a doll made of deerskin which she took with her everywhere. Her mother or aunt made it for her and furnished it with a tiny board or cradle. The girl would carry this on her back in imitation of her mother. She treated it as a baby, dressing and undressing it, singing lullabies to it and lacing it to the board. She also sewed required articles of clothing. Some girls used small puppies as dolls but they soon outgrew the stage where the girls could manage them.

The materials of dolls of the Shoshone and Cheyenne date them as post-white contact. They have rag bodies with features made on a waxed cloth that covers the head. The wigs are of horse hair, and the Cheyenne's are decorated profusely with beads and small metal discs that represent money.

The girls of the Kiowas also used puppies for their dolls. Figures represented a tangible representation of mythological beings. The Kiowas had a religious dread of such things and would not allow the children to have dolls.



Apache dolls in male and female costume; Arizona.



Infant Apache doll in cradle; Arizona.

#### theast Area

There is little mention in ethnological literature concerning dolls used as fetishes or toys by the Southeast tribes of the United States.

The Seminole children had a doll which was merely a stick with a lot of cloth wrapped around it. They would build houses, which they call camps, with these dolls. A *Study of Dolls*, by Hall and Caswell, tells of the present-day Seminole doll which is made of coconut fiber and dressed in miniature copies of the traditional tribal costume. The fiber of the palmetto which is a darkish brown is used and it is very suitable for the face and hands. The dress is made of brightly colored pieces of cloth sewn on a sewing machine, a treasured possession of the Seminole women. Long, even strips are cut in a variety of colors from lengths of material and stitched together in a pattern on the machine. This is cut again, sometimes at right angles and sometimes diagonally. These strips are again sewed together. The process may be repeated several times thus making patterns more and more complicated, depending on how many times the material is cut and sewed. These dolls are made for sale and priced according to size.

In North Carolina a fetish doll was used in pre-white days. The Indians carried the doll, which is described as a large puppet, with them into war. They told incredible stories about them and would ask counsel from the doll when in extremity.



Milwaukee Public Museum display of Kachina dolls.

The Kachina dolls are miniatures of the costumed and masked dancers, an exact reproduction of one of the estimated two hundred spirits. They are carved from cottonwood and painted. They are used by the girls to play but also serve an educational purpose by acquainting children with the characteristics and lore of the Kachinas. Very small girls are contented with baby dolls fastened to cradle boards; these are complete Kachina masks. One girl may own several figures which are frequently seen hanging from the walls or rafters of the pueblo rooms. The cottonwood roots used for them make the figures very light in weight and rather rough in texture. Most are entirely of wood with perhaps some feather adornment. The masked faces are almost all abstract or symbolic design. Most of the old-time Kachina makers first gave the entire figure, usually slightly wider than thick, a coat of white paint. Then a design was applied over the base coat, with special attention to the masks which they made sure held true to traditional forms and style. Since painting was done to preserve the painted surface, time would weather and fade them. Ben Hunt in *Kachina Dolls* (Milwaukee Public Museum. *Popular Science Handbook* 7) gives an account of these dolls, and the many modern uses to which the Kachina figures can be put.

Other dolls from this area have received less attention. The Pima tribe had clay dolls which were dressed in bast with wooden girdles and bead ornaments. The Pitt-Rivers Museum in England owns a doll from New Mexico, twelve inches tall and made from orange-tinted leather with horsehair for hair and beads for features. There were also some clay figures found on an ancient Indian site in Navaho territory which were at first thought to be major charms, but are now believed by Dr. J. Walter Pankake ("Clay Figurines Made by Navaho Children" *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 25:559) to have been made by children and used as dolls. These are about two inches long, the majority representing women, but sometimes eyes, ears or noses are shown.

uld be impossible to discuss each one and its meaning, so this discussion will be limited to those used as actual doll figures.

The Vancouver Island children had dolls of cedar bark that called for much imagination in the making. The finished item was similar in appearance to the corn-husk doll. One type was made of wood with a piece of cedar bark wound around it, and often equipped with a cradle board made of strips of cedar bark. A more pretentious figure from this area is a grotesque creature made entirely of cedar bark, with irregular features and cedar bark hair tied in wisps on either side of the head. It is used as a sh.

Some children's dolls, among the tribes of the Northwest Coast, were made as images of deities. Others, made of food and regarded as sacred, were entrusted to the child in its religious instruction. Another religious figure, mentioned by Robert Inverarity in *Art of the North West Coast Indians*, is a spirit canoe that contains a figure carved from yellow cedar and in a mummy-like wrapping, which was released on water to send on its journey the spirit of a person who had just been buried.

Other materials used as dolls by children of this region were pebbles. The Tlingit shaped them by resting the pebbles on a rock and hitting them with a hammerstone. One older woman mentioned, in *The Story of a Tlingit Community*, by I. Smith (Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin 101), that her mother had made a doll's head from a marble pebble.

Leather was also used to make dolls. This the Klikitat would steam to produce flexibility to shape the body. A distinctive feature among the Klikitat, who also used leather, was to sew the nose of leather on separately. The eyes and teeth were of beads and the clothing had fur trim.

The Indians of this region shared with the Eskimo the ability to make mechanical objects. Among these was the Nonlemgilia, which literally means "making foolish," and takes the form of a puppet with movable head and arms. Manipulated from underground, this figure would be made to dance around. Sometimes a bird made of wood and with leather wings would drop from the ceiling and carry away the head and then later return it. Marionettes controlled by strings were quite common. These were carved from wood and had jointed arms and legs. Usually quite grotesque in appearance, some had hair or a cape of fur. They were from fifteen to nineteen inches tall and painted colorfully in red, black and white. The strings that controlled them ran over the great beams of the house and were pulled by hidden manipulators who received their cues from songs. The strings were hidden by the dim light of the large house.

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Today, Indian dolls are made by many tribes as a source of income. The Indian shop in the Department of the Interior Building in Washington, D.C., which is operated by the Welfare and Recreation Association, carries dolls representative of the various tribes. The dolls are dressed in clothes imitating both early period and present-day styles of costume; some wear traditional ceremonial dress. These dolls vary widely in workmanship and price. They can also be found on Indian reservations and in trading posts across the country.

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