

# **IN DEFENSE OF DOLLS: AN ARGUMENT FOR THE RETURN OF DOLLS AS ART**

**BY EVAN HUEGEL**

**2<sup>ND</sup> PLACE**

***MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ARCHITECTURE AND DECORATIVE ARTS***

In the history of dolls, there have been two unfortunate outlooks on the doll. One view comes from the long established realm of art and the exclusivity that has caused a dismissal of the doll as a work of art. The second comes from a more recent cultural development. Movies like *Saw*, *Chuckee*, and *Annabelle*, where the main villain takes on the body of a doll, evidence that the doll has been turned from a child's toy into an object of horror. TRB #876 was the doll that caught my eye as a beautiful but stereotypically creepy doll that this paper shall try to defend. Both of these views which have so thoroughly pervaded society are a significant detriment to the doll, as they prevent an appreciation of the doll as art as well as taking the doll, an object that should be of comfort, and changing it into one of terror.

There has been an unfortunate distinction made within the art world in terms of fine and decorative arts. The misfortune stems not from the categories themselves, but from the connotations that come along with them. Whenever one goes to an art museum, traditionally the expectation is to find paintings, sculpture, photographs, and print making among other works. Rarely does one go into an art museum to find dolls. Dolls are excluded from the category of fine arts, either because they are mass produced or they are viewed as a child's toys or for some other reason. This exclusion, though useful to categorize the different portions of the arts, has unfortunately degraded our ability to view dolls as art.

Dolls have been around for a long time (some of the earliest being dated around 3000 B.C. and before) and have been a reflection of civilization (Fitzgerald 1). As the doll has evolved over the years in its various roles, there is an important aspect to keep in mind in regards to both its historical roles within different civilizations and its aesthetics. Even though dolls are so universal and common, a significant amount of time and craftsmanship has gone into the creation of dolls. One can almost imagine them as a kind of miniature sculptures that are accessible not only to the masses, but to those of a very young age. So though they may not be as grandiose as the works of Michelangelo, Da Vinci, and Donatello, in some ways they have been even more widespread in exposing people to art.

Though it pains me to say this, the exhibit that contains the dolls in the Museum of American Architecture and Decorative Arts has a bit of a reputation on the HBU campus among the students. It is commonly known as one of if not the creepiest place on campus. Why and when did dolls become so creepy? Naturally the entire genre of movies that not only play off of this fear, but have also furthered the connection between horror and dolls seems to be a prime candidate for blame. Yet, the root of this correlation of the doll and the horror genre begins before the creation of some of cinema's most iconic horror doll stories.

One of the first instances of a doll-like character within a horror story appears in 1816 in E.T.A. Hoffman's *Der Sandman*, where the main character, after many frightening events, falls in love with what turns out to be an automaton (Smith). The automaton seems to be a rather strange addition to a play that deals with the main character's fear of the Sandman stealing

children's eyes. Ernst Jentsch nearly a century later wrote his essay "On the Psychology of the Uncanny" analyzing Hoffman's work focusing especially on the automaton. Jentsch describes the fear created by the uncanny as stemming from "namely, doubt as to whether an apparently living being really is animate and, conversely, doubt as to whether a lifeless object may not in fact be animate" (Jentsch 8). In regards to dolls, the fear comes about in that one would normally expect the doll to be inanimate, but there exists the possibility that it in fact is alive and capable of action.

The terror of dolls, however, does not necessarily just come from the physical harm that can be done by them once capable of action. C.S. Lewis in his book *The Problem of Pain* provides his own definition of the uncanny. He states that if

[Y]ou were told there was a tiger in the next room: you would know that you were in danger and would probably feel fear. But if you were told 'There is a ghost in the next room', and believed it, you would feel, indeed, what is often called fear, but of a different kind. It would not be based on the knowledge of danger, for no one is primarily afraid of what a ghost may do to him, but of the mere fact that it is a ghost. It is 'uncanny' rather than dangerous, and the special kind of fear it excites may be called Dread. (Lewis 5-6)

Our fear then comes from a fear from what has enabled the inanimate object to move by itself. This of course in modern times has been coupled with the notion of bodily harm, for the idea of ghosts and spirits within the media are shown to be capable of physical harm. These ideas, though so prevalent in our culture, need to be fought, and not merely for the sanctity of our children's toys.

As we create art in the form of these dolls, we participate in a form of glorification of God. Just as God made us in his image, so too we make these dolls in our image. Yes, we are fallen creatures prone to sin and therefore have flaws but at the same time we are God's creation and there is beauty in that. We should not look upon the dolls we create which are a hybrid of animate and inanimate as the demons that C.S. Lewis describes who see humans as "a revolting hybrid" (Lewis 206). We should not see dolls as creepy, but as a dim reflection, an analogy, of what we are, and in so doing cause us to praise the one who created us.

#### Works Cited

Fitzgerald, Toni. "Digging Up Ancient Dolls: A History Of Dolls, From 4000 B.C. To 400 A.D." *Doll Reader* 36.3 (2008): 44. MasterFILE Premier. Web. 20 Feb. 2015.

Lewis, C.S. *The Complete C.S. Lewis Signature Classics*. San Francisco, Calif.: HarperSanFrancisco, 2002. Print

Lewis, C.S. *The Problem of Pain*. Harper Collins E-books, 2004.

Smith, Marquard. "Why Are Dolls so Creepy?" *BBC Culture*. 1 Dec. 2014. Web. 20 Feb. 2015. <<http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20141201-why-are-dolls-so-creepy>>.

"The Psychology of the Sick," *The British Medical Journal* 2.3522 (1928): 24-25. Web.