

The Doll's House Museum Basel presents:

Dolls As Reflections Of Times Past

Pocket dolls: A journey through time from Mignonnette to Polly Pocket™

The Doll's House Museum Basel presents a selection of the most beautiful and interesting mignonnettes from the 19th and 20th centuries (to about 1950). The central attraction will be the legendary Mignonnette, which enjoyed such a great success from 1878 onward essentially due to her extensive trousseau and clothes wardrobe. Amongst the 200 exhibits, which have been lovingly arranged in the Museum, there will be a varied collection of clothes, accessories, furniture and decorative items.

The history of small dolls up to the Mignonnette

The history of small and even very small dolls can be traced back to antiquity. However, the actual concept for the mignonnette took place towards the end of the 19th century in France. Amongst the more well-known precursors of the pocket dolls are the all-wooden dolls from Val Gardena, the American travelling doll «Hitty», «Frozen Charlotte», doll's house dolls and «Parisiennes».

A decisive step in the development of the modern all-bisque articulated pocket doll (subsequently called mignonnette) was laid by Fernand Sustrac and Maurice Schmitt, who in 1877 and 1879, respectively patented inventions for dolls with wooden elbow and knee ball joints. The first French «Poupées de poche» or pocket dolls measured 12 to 14 cm, were pale in colour and usually barefoot.

Mignonnettes as Collectors' Items

At the beginning of the 20th century, doll lovers' collections consisted exclusively of very rare and exceptional dolls. For a long time, mignonnettes were therefore not considered to be desirable collectors' items. It was not until relatively recently that collectors recognised their intrinsic value. Today the mignonnette is one of the most important types of dolls in collectors' circles.

The Birth of the Mignonnette (1878 – 1883)

The success story of the mignonnette began with the French girls' magazine «La Poupée Modèle» and Madame Lavallée-Péronne, owner of the Parisian dolls' shop «A la Poupée de Nuremberg». The doll trader provided the magazine with interesting articles about dolls; and the magazine made free advertising for the shop.

In August 1878 Lavallée-Péronne started a new column in «La Poupée Modèle» giving details about the new pocket dolls available in her shop. She also wrote about the real cloth do-it-yourself kit which comprised the first part of a complete wardrobe series. From then on, the magazine regularly enclosed sewing and cloth patterns for making dolls' clothes, as well as various other do-it-yourself printed instructions.

The all-bisque pocket doll, measuring 13 cm, was a complete success and in 1880, in the February issue of «La Poupée Modèle», was given the name «Mignonnette». She measured 12 cm to 14 cm and was thin. She had fixed glass eyes, a closed mouth, a mohair wig with long blond hair, was jointed at the neck, the shoulders and the hips and was barefoot.

Strong Competition from Germany (1883 – 1891)

When Madame Lavallée-Péronne retired in 1883, Mademoiselle Régnault took over the dolls' shop «A la Poupée de Nuremberg» but was compelled to close in 1891. One of the important reasons for this development was the success of the more modern German mignonnette doll made by Simon & Halbig. She was more suited to the prevailing ideal of esthetic beauty with her round, chubby little body measuring 13

cm. In addition, she had sleep eyes and a slightly open mouth, which showed sweet little baby teeth in the upper row. She also wore fashionable stockings and shoes. Shortly before the shop's demise, Mademoiselle Régnault launched the Simon & Halbig doll. Unfortunately it was too late to save her business.

«La Poupée Modèle» and the Revival (1891 – 1907)

The loss of its most important business partner created a big problem for the publisher of «La Poupée Modèle», Fernand Thiéry. The important contributions, which he had received from Mademoiselle Régnault, stopped and he had to find a new partner, which proved to be a difficult task. As an immediate measure, Thiéry decided the only solution possible was to take over the whole inventory of the shop «A la Poupée de Nuremberg» and begin to sell the dolls himself—by direct mail-order—to his readers. This proved to be a success and the popularity of the mignonnette enjoyed a revival due to the 13 cm German model, often sold with fashionable black stockings.

The Decline of the Classic Mignonnette (1907 – 1917)

The decline of the mignonnette was linked to the decline of «La Poupée Modèle». The market share of this magazine for girls was taken over, as from 1905, by the girls' review «La Semaine de Suzette» and its doll «Bleuette», which measured 27 cm.

Thiéry tried to keep up with the market by introducing his «Benjamine», which measured 26 cm. He almost completely neglected the mignonnette which was soon forgotten by the young girls. When World War I broke out, the German company Simon & Halbig suffered delivery problems. In 1917 Thiéry wrote that the all-bisque dolls were, once and for all, completely sold out .

The Era after the Mignonnette

The end of the mignonnette of course did not result in the end of the pocket dolls as such. Between 1910 and 1950, the so-called bath dolls were very successful. They measured 5 to 15 cm and were initially made out of celluloid and later out of hard plastic. In the 1950s and 1960s the German Ari dolls were popular. They were made out of caoutchouc and measured 6 to 15 cm. Further important and successful pocket dolls of the time include: the American «Kiddles», otherwise known as «Littles», from the 1960s and 1980s, measuring 5 cm, «Dawn» und «Pippa», the mini fashion dolls of the 1970s, measuring 17 cm, and Polly PocketTM as from 1989.

Mignonnettes in the Doll's House Museum Basel

In the Doll's House Museum Basel we are presenting to visitors an interesting selection of authentic mignonnettes, e.g. all-bisque articulated dolls from France and Germany as well as a variety of other miniature dolls, e.g. «Lilliputiens», «Minuscules», doll's house dolls and Ari dolls. The exhibits, which are lovingly arranged in special showcases, are complete with matching trousseaux, clothing and accessories. This exhibition has only been made possible thanks to the «Musée de la Poupée, Paris» and its director, Mr. Samy Odin, who were willing to make their outstanding collection of these dolls available to us and to give us the benefit of their knowledge on the subject.

Live Demonstration

On the following days during the special exhibition in the Doll's House Museum Basel, a leading doll maker, Mrs. Veronica Mussoni, will make live demonstrations, showing how to handcraft miniature dolls and their clothing.

30./31.10.2004 (Sat./Sun.), 1.11.2004 (Mon.), 13./14.11.2004 (Sat./Sun.),
27./28.11.2004 (Sat./Sun.), 11./12.12.2004 (Sat./Sun.), 18./19.12.2004 (Sat./Sun.),
8./9.1.2005 (Sat./Sun.), 29./30.1.2005 (Sat./Sun.) as from 1 pm.

Legal Information

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Bibliography

- Héritier, Mathilde und Odin, Samy (Ed.): Mignonnette: her history, wardrobe and miniature world, 1878–1917, Editions Musée de la Poupée, Paris, 2003.
- Musée de la Poupée, Paris (www.museedelapoupeeparis.com).
- Le cercle privé de la poupée (www.poupendol.com).

Opening times:

Museum/Shop: daily from 11 am to 5 pm, Thursdays until 8 pm

Café: daily from 10 am to 6 pm, Thursdays until 9 pm

Admission:

CHF 7.— / 5.—

Children up to 16 years are admitted free of charge, and only if accompanied by an adult.

The museum does not charge supplementary fees for special exhibitions.

The museum is wheelchair accessible.

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