The ‘Holy Grail’ of Early American Dolls

Though sweet and simple, Izannah Walker’s dolls fetch thousands of dollars.

BY CATHERINE RIEDEL

When I was 8 years old, my grandmother gave me a cloth doll for Christmas. Neither pretty nor fancy, she was plainly dressed in gingham, with yarn hair, button eyes, and a painted-on smile. She wasn’t exactly fun or exciting, and I didn’t play with her much. But long after my other childhood toys had met their fate at the annual church bazaar, I knew I could always count on Granny’s doll to keep me company. For me, she was truly special and held a special place in my heart.

Izannah Frankford Walker was one of the earliest known American female doll makers—and a true New England character. Born in Bristol, Rhode Island, in 1817, Walker was orphaned by age 7 and went to live with relatives in nearby Somerset, Massachusetts. Little else is known about her early life, but accounts show evidence of her doll making as early as 1848. Although she made her living in dolls, she dressed in overalls and lamented that she hadn’t been born a man.

By 1855 Walker had a thriving business making dolls, and in 1873, she patented the design for an unbreakable doll that was “inexpensive, could be easily kept clean, and was not apt to injure a young child.” Her process included fusing several layers of fabric with glue or paste and pressing them into a mold to create the doll’s face and head. Once dry, they held their shape and could be sewn together, then stuffed with horsehair, cotton, paper, or rags and covered with a layer of stockinette. Cloth ears were attached, and Walker and her three sisters painted the dolls’ delicate faces and dabbed on curls of hair. Finally, the heads were sewn to the doll’s body—often with painted-on boots. Their sweetness and simplicity make Walker’s work the “holy grail” among collectors of Early American dolls. They’re also admired by folk art enthusiasts, perhaps because their faces resemble the primitive portraits of Erastus Salisbury Field and William Matthew Prior, both Walker contemporaries. The style and features of certain Walker examples are so distinctive that some experts surmise they may have been painted as portrait dolls.

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