

The Dollhouse Museum

Harrisburg, Pennsylvania

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY GINA NAPOLI



The museum's oldest doll, a china head doll, is 16 inches tall and can be found propped on the bench in the parlor.



Zapf Creations created this doll in Germany. She can be found in the dining room amongst other lavishly dressed dolls.



The Tee-Wee Hand Babe Living doll.

Nestled in a quiet community within Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, is the Dollhouse Museum, a dainty surprise of which few people are aware. The museum is a life-size 1890s Victorian-style dollhouse filled with rooms of an eclectic collection of over 8,000 dolls, and even more miniatures, antiques, and doll accessories. It's a story that quietly unfolds, each room carrying a theme or time period.

Each toy takes visitors back to a more innocent time in their lives. No matter when you were born, the Dollhouse Museum is a nostalgic trip filled with wooden and porcelain dolls from centuries past, antique paper dolls, timeless classics such as Barbie®, or characters long *Gone With the Wind*. This place has something to interest everyone.

Just past the front door is a cotton candy colored storefront, reminiscent of Barbie's Dream House. The parlor is where the rare, older dolls (circa 1825-1925) have their tea party. The two life-size dolls around the table were made by Simon Halbig in Germany. Currently each is worth approximately \$4,000.

The long, thin dolls that resemble draft dodgers and lie just beneath the tea party are bed dolls that were popular in the 1920s. Women aged 18-25 would perch these dolls atop their properly made beds. Not featured in these par-

ticular models were the cigarettes that fit into the tiny, round holes in their mouths.

The museum's oldest doll lies in the parlor on the bench. She is a pink china head doll, dating from approximately the early 1800s. Not as old, but a unique doll in her own right, is the Tee Wee Hand Babe Living Doll originating from the S & H Novelty Company in Atlantic City, New Jersey. The Dollhouse Museum curator originally purchased the doll for \$250.

Framed paper dolls from *Ladies' Home Journal*, *Smithsonian*, *Victorian Girls* and *The Boston Herald*, to name a few, grace the hallway in front of the parlor.

Next to the parlor is the dining room, where fancy dolls in their flashy formal wear pose glamorously. A life-size doll wears a size five dress and shoes. Her head is fashioned after the French Jumeaus. The china cupboard holds Nancy Ann Storybook dolls c. 1930-1958. The debutante dolls in the dining room evoke the most "oohs" and "aahs" from visitors.

Down the hall from the dining room is the kitchen, which holds such kitschy commercial favorites as the Campbell Soup Kids, Aunt Jemima and Captain Crunch. It's a room sure to inspire plenty of jingle singing. Next door, the lavishly decorated master bedroom holds



The life-size doll in the dining room wears a size five dress.



The rare, older dolls having their tea party. Dolls 7, 8, and 9 were made by the Schoenhut Doll Company. Doll 10 was made in England in the early 1900s.



Dolls dressed in wedding and fancy attire grace the dining room with their presence.



Framed paper dolls can be found in the hallway in front of the parlor.



The bathroom represents children.

Margaret Mitchell's 1938 movie *Gone With the Wind* character dolls and accessories. You can almost hear the timeless echoes of Katie Scarlett grasping dirty carrots and stating, "I do declare" and "fiddle-dee-dee."

The children's playroom holds mostly mass-produced dolls like Barbie and Snoopy. However, there are also toys that date back as early as 1926. The rarest doll in the entire Dollhouse Museum can be found in this room—Shrinking Violet. Though she was mass-produced by Mattel® in 1962, Shrinking Violet is the only example that the curator has ever seen. She is a floppy sort with blinking eyes and puckering lips. She says demure phrases when her cord is pulled. "I don't like when people look at me" and "I'm shy," are two of her most oft uttered. Her demeanor was certainly indicative of how demure women in American culture were expected to be in 1962.

Next to the children's playroom, the bathroom holds dolls that represent children. One may remember Patty Play Pal or Tumbelina, both from the Ideal Toy Company. Twins Ruthie and David were taken off the market in 1972 because they were anatomically correct. A little older and certainly less risqué are dolls from the 1940s such as Pinky by Madame Alexander and the Kewpie doll by Rose O'Neil.

The bathroom leads to the library, where dolls of multicultural origin and pop culture reside. The royal family waves from its shelf, as do the President and First Lady dolls. Music groups, sports figures, television stars, movie legends, and even Scouts, stare at visitors from behind the glass. Dolls from other countries tap at the glass directly behind the library.

Back through the hallway lies the ice cream parlor. It is in this room where handmade puppets, fairy tale dolls,

carousel horses, and bell-bottomed, African American dolls from the 1970s at the many tea parties, luncheons, birthday parties, bridal and baby showers held daily.

The very last room in the Dollhouse Museum is the room built especially for the guys. It's full of G. I. Joe® dolls, Hot Wheels™ and Matchbox cars, and three tracks of "O" gauge train tracks. Most of these collectibles are still in their original packaging.

Every time visitors look into each room, they're bound to find something they hadn't seen before. Woven into the rich tapestry of each doll is a story waiting to be told.

The Dollhouse Museum is located at 2004 State St., Harrisburg, PA 17103.

Gina Napoli is a freelance writer and Web site designer who resides in Pennsylvania with her husband, two children and dog, Stella. In addition to visiting obscure museums, her hobbies include making soap and reading.



Shrinking Violet is the most rarest doll in the children's playroom.