

Collecting Antique Dolls

By
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Beautiful Bébés



Fine Dolls and Precious Playthings of the Past

The first steps we take toward collecting anything are tenuous at best. All we know is that we have ‘fallen in love’ with a particular object and find that it has touched off a harmony in our spirit that we never knew existed. In my case, the realm of antique dolls beckoned to me so profoundly that I wandered in unwittingly only to find that my passion and joy already lived there! My passion for discovery of a doll’s history from creation to provenance bloomed overnight. I found myself suddenly returning to the studious ways of my youth in search of knowledge about historical and relative data to the doll, its creators, and the evolutionary process that brought a particular model or style into being. I was flooded with joy at each new discovery and each new successful acquisition.

My collection was started when I was just a wee one, thanks to my military father who took great delight in bringing treasures home from the countries he served in or visited in Europe. These ‘gifts’ were the seeds that planted a love of dolls in my heart. The seeds were nurtured by my mother when she lovingly arranged them on shelves for me to admire and respect...this took some doing to convince a four year old that they should live on the shelf! However, time passed and as I grew into womanhood and had a family of my own, my collection of travel dolls was stored in favor of making room for cribs and blocks and a life for my two sons.

When my youngest son reached high school, it seemed dolls were beckoning to me once again. I began noticing them at antique fairs and shops and felt the first faint stirrings to have a real antique doll of my own. One misty Friday morning, driving through a well established neighborhood, I saw a sign that read DOLL ESTATE SALE. I ignored the voice of reason as my car seemingly drove itself straight to the event. I could not believe my eyes. The estate manager was just arranging the last doll of some three hundred that all seemed to be clamoring for my attention. I was overwhelmed! I had never seen that many dolls in one place. At that time I had no idea there were shows and fairs I could have been attending. Given the price of antique dolls for a then single mom, that was probably for the best! This is a cautionary tale, albeit one with a happy-ending, and gives good reasons for sharing some hard won collecting tips and strategies. On that misty Friday morning I wrote my first three digit check for two antique dolls. Although I have never regretted that day, I can say with certainty that if I found myself in that situation again, I would select somewhat differently and certainly be better prepared to make wise choices for the present and the future.

So, let's look at the process of collecting antique dolls. The most important aspect of collecting is to *feed your capacity to be fulfilled by your collection*. This is your most important step. In other words, always buy what will bring you joy and delight and second to that, will add value to your collection as time passes. If you buy a doll strictly based on her worth or value, but she really doesn't resonate with your heart, she will never make you happy. Fulfillment is not easily achieved. Just as 'Pretty is, is pretty does' in people, so it is with dolls. We can 'fall' for a pretty face or the idea of a dolls' value, however, it is important that we be cautious in our purchase and certain of the doll's attributes or identity, the quality of the doll, the doll's overall originality, it's general condition, the rarity of the doll and finally the doll's actual value which takes all of these factors into consideration. When a doll has been put to these tests and you have given leeway for one exception over another value-add, then you will be fulfilled by your choice.

If you are taking your very first steps and just beginning your collection I urge you to invest in good doll reference books. These will be the cornerstones and foundations for your collection and will give you the courage and encouragement to settle on a decision or to accomplish research on a particular manufacturer, historical period and specifics pertinent to

various types of dolls. I offer a list of favorites at the end of this article and where possible, methods for acquisition.

Other important tools that you will need whenever you are shopping at a live show include:

- * One or two Doll Valuation and Identification Guides (suggestions below)
- * A magnifying glass in a convenient travel size
- * A small flashlight with strong light
- * A notebook to make notes in and assist you in making a clear decision when you have found several dolls to choose from.
- * A carrier or something to safely transport the doll once you have made a decision.
- * An extra supply of bubble wrap or other protective material is always a good idea.

If you are buying online, there are significant disadvantages to both the buyer and the seller. First and foremost, neither one of you are face to face in the transaction which leaves the door open for miscommunication or omission of relevant facts that may or may not be intentional. Most sellers are honest, law abiding folks. However, as in all transactions involving a respectable amount of money, there are many unscrupulous and greedy people that care more about making a dollar than whether or not they are honoring a code of honesty. I tread carefully here, as I sell extensively online, in magazines and at shows. So, my advice is; know who you are dealing with. Ask for references. Make sure they have excellent feedback from their peers. And most of all ask questions about the doll. If any doubt exists about the veracity of the sale, ask for a special photo of the doll that only the owner can provide. Ask for a picture that is not posted. This will reassure you about the honesty of the seller and the condition of the doll.

Finally, unless otherwise posted, the seller of a high cost, high quality doll should have a return policy. Be clear about the nature of the policy and if none exists, ASK! If you have no return option, beware and be wise. There is no such thing as too many questions!

Now, let's review the critical steps involved in acquiring a doll:

1. Identify~

Who is the doll? Who made the doll and what model is the doll? Many dolls have identifying marks on their heads, shoulder plates, and/or bodies. If

there are no marks, perhaps the doll is identifiable by virtue of the doll makers' style or craftsmanship. Types of dolls are identified by the material used to make the doll head. So, a doll with a head made of composition attached to a cloth stuffed body is termed a composition doll and a doll with a paper-mâché head on a leather body will be considered a paper-mâché doll just as a bisque head on a wooden or composition body will be considered a bisque doll. Many books are available with glossaries of maker's marks, initials and mold numbers to assist you. And finally, ask the dealer you are working with for insight and any supporting information he or she may have.

2. Evaluate the Quality~

To quote Patsy Moyer, (1st Ed. Doll Values Antique to Modern) "All dolls were not created equal." Manufacturer's varied widely in their quality and much was dependent on the circumstances at the time. Was the doll the first or the last of hundreds made from the same tired mold? Perhaps the worker was fresh and feeling creative or perhaps it was the last head painted at the end of a long week and he was rushed and anxious to get done. A sharply molded, crisply painted and evenly textured doll will always have more merit than a doll with dull features and uneven finish or sloppy facial decoration. Be a discerning judge of the doll's artistic execution.

3. Originality~

A doll's originality can be a challenge to discern. Is it the original or correct dress, wig, shoes? Are her eyes set in their original set or are they replaced? Is the head on the appropriate body? Dolls with replaced parts, or bodies that are incorrect to the model do not bring the same value to the market as a doll that has all her original components. Again, ask the seller for as much as they know about the doll.

4. General Condition~

It's not hard to understand that the better condition a doll is in the more value the doll retains. Be a super sleuth and check the doll over carefully to be certain that the doll has not been repaired or broken. Give special attention to an antique bisque doll's head as this is what dictates 75% of the doll's value. Check fingers and toes if possible. Certainly if a doll is in original clothing that has never been removed, this may not be possible or advisable, however, diligence on this fourth step will save you money and disappointment. It is important to note that certain dolls of exceptionally high value due to scarcity or popularity may be very desirable in spite of damage; however, the cost should never be that of a perfect counterpart.

This step will call your magnifier and flashlight into play. Don't be afraid to look at the doll closely. Shine the light inside the head and look carefully at the outside of the head as you do this to see if there are any cracks or painted areas inconsistent with the general paint. If so, ask questions and listen carefully to the explanation. Only you can decide if the doll's condition is acceptable.

5. How Rare Is The Doll?

This is a very exciting aspect to so many collectors and a chief component in determining value. The more scarce and unusual a doll is, the more sought after the doll becomes, driving the value skyward. The rarer a doll, the more forgiving we tend to be of minor flaws, originality concerns or even damage, depending on the location of the damage and the extent.

When all the above factors have been taken into consideration, we can arrive at a fairly good estimation of a doll's value; to us and to the doll collecting marketplace. Armed with a good doll valuation and identification guide such as:

- * Jan Foulke's Guide to Dolls: A Definitive Identification and Price Guide
- * Doll Values Antique to Modern, Ninth Edition, by Linda Edward

And, taking your time will give you the confidence to make wise choices and sound decisions. Both of these guides are thoughtfully written, well researched and generously illustrated with pictures and samples of makers' marks and a brief historical perspective of makers and manufacturers. The authors have included price guide samples ranging from excellent to poor on most models, as a further attempt to clarify this sometimes confusing aspect of collecting.

Over the years, many a hopeful buyer has brandished these same guides in an attempt to justify a price reduction on a desired doll. Antique doll sellers appreciate, encourage and respect that buyers are informed and well armed with reference materials. However, it is important to note that dolls can vary greatly based on many elements and not the least of which may be popular demand or certain elusiveness in their look. It is also important to note that both aforementioned guides may agree within a close proximity of a specific doll value; however, often according to the guides there can be vast differences. All value guides are subjective to the author's training,

experience, specific data collection and last but certainly not least, personal influence. In summary, it is important to understand and remember that a doll value guide is just that; a guide. So, many factors can influence buyer's decisions to buy as well as sellers' decisions to sell. If a doll has excellent provenance or all original clothing and accessories, or is in incredibly pristine condition or possibly the "Rarest of Them All" then you may expect the price to exceed a guideline. If a combination of these factors comes into play, you may expect the price to well exceed a guideline. And, as time goes by, the very value of most antique dolls will generally move upward.

Time and again you will hear collectors and authors repeat the adage; "Buy the best you can afford at the time." This can be a particularly challenging concept in the beginning. We tend to be easily enamored in the early stages of our collecting careers. However, I have certainly gained tremendous respect for this bit of logic. It may mean you won't be able to buy as much as you would like, however, the purchases that you make will always reflect quality and are more likely to grow in value. Many antique doll sellers offer payment plans to assist you in this quest.

Whether you are a new collector or have been traveling down Collector Road for many years, you will find that there will always be more to learn and mysteries to unravel. Curiosity is the spark for discovery, so ask lots of questions and build your reference library!

In closing, we must never forget that all of these unique and special antique treasures come from a period of time long past. The creative and innovative men and women that were inspired to create these precious playthings of yesterday have long since departed this planet and these dolls are the legacy of their inspiration and mark a historical place in time. We are the keepers of their dreams and the guardians of their creations. We have each chosen to take on our "Little Charges" and protect them and cherish them until the next generation of guardians comes along. Being a collector of antique dolls defines many emotions, however, the greatest joy and perhaps dearest challenge is the hunt. The final attainment of each precious or significant doll, after a diligent and thorough search, is perhaps the greatest and most fulfilling reward we can hope for~

Great Library Building Blocks

- *Jan Foulke's Guide to Dolls: A Definitive Identification and Price Guide
- * Doll Values Antique to Modern, Ninth Edition, by Linda Edward
- * Doll Makers and Marks- A Guide to Identification by Dawn Herlocher
- * 200 Years of Dolls- Identification and Price Guide by Dawn Herlocher
- * German Encyclopedia 1800-1939 by Jurgen & Marianne Cieslik
- * German Doll Studies- Historic Doll Research from the Published Archives of Cieslik's Puppenmagazin
- * The Encyclopedia of French Dolls Vols. 1 & 2
by Francois and Danielle Theimer
- * The Collector's Encyclopedia of Dolls Vols. 1 & 2
By Dorothy, Elizabeth and Evelyn Coleman
- * The Body Book by Florence Theriault

There are many other great books with excellent information. As you build your library, and define your collecting goals, your library choices will reflect your special interests and objectives. You may also enjoy the fascinating articles and perspectives in Antique Doll Collector magazine, not to mention the opportunity to see a vast array of dolls featured by sellers and auction houses.

Good luck in your aspirations and journey into the wonderful, historical world of Antique Dolls!

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