

Original & Opulent: Designers of One-of-a-Kind Fashion Dolls

BY CAROLYN B. COOK

What is small, glamorous, and brings big prices on the Internet? The answer: one-of-a-kind fashion dolls.

The trend started with the *Barbie* doll. The curvy body made a wonderful mannequin for those who enjoyed designing fashionable outfits and sewing them in doll scale. But the number of designers has escalated in the last couple of years. When asked why, Nik Morones of NiniMomo answered emphatically, "Because of the Internet—that's what opened doors." Jenny Sutherland of JaC Designs added that she "wouldn't be close to being known if it weren't for the Internet."

Jim Faraone, the author of a series of books on doll makeovers as well as being an artist himself, says that the makeovers have been going on for over 20 years. "The pioneers in the fashion doll makeover world had to put up with collectors stating they didn't want any creation without a manufacturer's label on it. Over time the collectors' appreciation grew, and now fashion doll

makeovers are very big in the collecting world," Faraone stated. He has a list of over 328 designers, and there are uncounted others.

Artist Renee Coughlan pointed out that "one-of-a-kind dolls came into popularity because back about 1994-95, at the height of *Barbie* collectible fever, collectors became discouraged at the large editions that Mattel was producing and looked for limited unique high quality dolls to fill that void."

Jerrod Thomas, of Jerrod de Wolfe, added "The appeal of the one-of-a-kind dolls to collectors is simply having something that no one else has. Collectors want something that is completely unique and they are willing to pay to have that exclusivity."

Jenny Sutherland agreed, "Collectors love originality—a doll you don't see every day. What collectors love about the one-of-a-kind dolls is that the dolls are so full of detail. Each doll has life to it." Jenny emphasized that designers have to stay original.

A major impetus to the trend of designing



The Genie
by Jenny Sutherland

for fashion dolls was the appearance of Ashton-Drake's *Gene* in 1995, soon followed by Robert Tonner's *Tyler* and others. Designing for a doll 16 inches rather than 11½ inches tall appeals to many of the designers. Jenny Sutherland, for example, began creating one-of-a-kind dolls with *Barbie*, but now works with *Gene* and *Tyler*. Jenny prefers to do the repainting while her sister Chrissy Stewart sews the costumes.

The artists have chosen to make one-of-a-kind dolls for various reasons. Jim Faraone said "I mainly do one-of-a-kind dolls because I would go nuts if I had to make the same outfit over and over again! Each new doll is a new experience and a new challenge which keeps your mind, ideas, and creations fresh." Faraone explained that each year he comes up with a new line of dolls so collectors don't get bored.

Renee Coughlan said, "I've always approached my dolls as a work of art. The whole process from the creation of the doll, down to the photos I put on my Web site, is very important to me. I want each doll to connect with the viewer in some emotional way." Renee creates dolls with story and a definite personality. "This comes through in the clothing and accessories, too," she said. "I hope this is what makes my dolls appealing to collectors." Renee transforms both *Barbie* and *Gene* into a variety of fantastic characters. "I came into this (making one-of-a-

kind dolls) fairly early and became known as the 'Fairy Lady' in the *Barbie* world. Timing makes all the difference."

The designers vary with the degree to which they make over the original doll. Some concentrate on the costuming and hairstyles. Others repaint faces, re-root hair, and even re-bend limbs to carry out their vision. Marie LeBreton of NiniMomo said that she and Nik Moronese divide up the work: she roots eyelashes, is the seamstress, does the beadwork, and makes accessories. Nik designs the costumes and translates them into patterns, does the facial painting, and creates the hairstyles and jewelry. They prefer working on *Barbie* dolls, as Nik said, "It gives *Barbie* lovers another facet of collecting."

Jerrold Thomas (of Jerrold de Wolfe, an imaginary designer who is a compilation of Adrian, Jacques Fath, and Christian Dior) said "The challenge is designing period fashions that are authentic, but not merely recreations of old styles. I steep myself in fashion history references from the 1940s and '50s, but then I design something that is truly original. The mood, the attitude, the details are correct for the period, but the



Premiere Rose
by Jerrold
de Wolfe



Autumn Gail
by Jerrold de Wolfe



Rose de' Rio by Jerrold de Wolfe



Roses in the Rain
by Jerrold de Wolfe

Jerrold de Wolfe

Jerrold de Wolfe

idea is unique." He explained that the fun part is pretending he is Jerrold de Wolfe, designing for glamorous clients like Lauren Bacall, Esther Williams, Greer Garson, Grace Kelly or Suzy Parker.

Magalie Houle Dawson of MHD Designs has a similar philosophy: "I studied the history of costume, but I'm not reproducing those. I put myself in different eras to create the designs." She prefers 15 to 22-inch size dolls. Most of the 70 ensembles she made last year were for Gene and Tyler dolls, although she admits that one of her influences is Barbie,

along with old movies and the styles of the 1940s and '50s. Magalie sells all of her dolls either through her own Web site or eBay. She sees her dolls "as sculpture more than fashions. The dolls are not to play with, they're more to display."

Many of the designers have impressive backgrounds. Tré Kaminski of Limited Original Dolls by Tré

worked for Gianni Versace as a designer for 22 years, but she enjoys the change to dolls. Bill Jones worked for many years as a professor of theatre design, designing costumes for shows and private clients, and working as a makeup artist for the San Francisco Opera. He said, "It's fun

Le diavol Rose
by Magalie Houle
Dawson



C'est l'hiver, mon Gen.
Magalie Houle Dawson's
dolls have French names,
since she is a native of
Quebec.



Miss Sardinia by NiniMomo, who specialize in dolls dressed for beauty pageants and interpret how the gowns reflect the culture of many countries.

to paint and costume small figures that don't talk back. I can create costumes no stage performer would dare to wear, or that are too fantastic to be practical."

Jerrold Thomas, a graduate of the Rhode Island School of

Design, worked for 12 years as art director for the McCall Pattern company and is now art director for a New York-based international fashion forecasting company. David Wolfe, Jerrold's partner in Jerrold de Wolfe, is a fashion forecaster and creative director of The Donegar Group, a leading fashion buying and consulting company. He has worked as a consultant for fashion designers such as Calvin

Klein and Adrianne Vittadini and has interviewed fashion stars such as Donna Karan, Ralph Lauren, and Valentino. Nik Moronesi is a fashion photographer who has worked for agencies such as Wilhelmina, Elite, and Click.

Tré Kaminski said, "Collectors know that with my dolls they are getting some stage in my life that happened, or something I admire. I put all of me in my dolls. They have to be

Gore by Jenny Sutherland



On Father's Arm by Bill Jones



Miss Sudan by NiniMomo



Miss Samoa 2000 by NiniMomo



Jim Faraone



By Jim Faraone

Jim Faraone



By Jim Faraone



"Last year my theme was 'Rugs' and this year I have an Irish inspired 'Red Devil' theme," said Jim Faraone.



Tre Kaminski

Dressed by Tre Kaminski for the program with over 25,000 beads sewn by hand.



Bill Jones



Bill Jones

The Snow Queen by Bill Jones

Done by Bill Jones