

## **"A Land and its Dolls"**

### **Collections, Collectors, Curation and Memory**

**ICME/ICOM** –International Council of Museums 2013, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

**Dr. Shelly Shenhav-Keller**

The meaning and place of souvenirs in constructing and shaping Israeliness has several aspects. A souvenir is an object, a cultural product, and furthermore, a “symbolic unit” produced in a special socio-cultural context, both for the internal needs of the cultural group in which it is produced, and for external use as well. Unlike other cultural objects, the fundamental nature of souvenirs stems from its displacement, its shifting from one place to another, and even more so, by virtue of inbuilt memory. The memory which surfaces and reappears is found in the French word ‘souvenir,’ and its Latin roots. Thus, souvenirs constitute a material and tangible testimony, which symbolically freeze the memory or fleeting experience of a person or a place. Souvenirs are a representational metonymic part of the whole – and exceed the sum of its parts. Souvenirs hold sensations, feelings, experiences, and memories. They arouse a desire and need to take away something representational from a place where people have spent time, or to give it away as a gift to those who were not there and did not share the experience, or were not part of the place.

The souvenir dolls made and designed in Israel are the central part of this paper, which is about an exhibition I have curated in Eretz Israel Museum in Tel-Aviv. More than two hundred dolls have been gathered from fourteen sources - museums, national institutions and private collectors and collections. The paper will present both - the historical and the thematic analysis which stands at the heart of the exhibition.

The production and design of these dolls played a significant role in the “invention” of tradition, which serves as one of the primary systems for building national identity and guaranteeing common coherence, which claim to be of long-standing primarily in times of dramatic change. This invented and instrumental practice sought to add its contribution to the establishment of Israeli society as a nation – “an imagined community” in Anderson’s sense of the word, based on common images, values and a sense of belonging.

National costume dolls are a cultural implement that constitutes part of the national ideology created in the country and at the same time are also their manifestations. Based on this argument I wish to relate to souvenir dolls not only as cultural objects but also as a cultural-political "text" (Shenhav-Keller, 1993, 2006). This approach makes it possible to examine not only the material aspects and special messages inherent in one doll or another, but also to examine the social and political statements beyond. This perspective makes it possible to learn about processes, power relations and perceptions in Israeli society, and the way in which the elite group presents and is representative of cultural groups, expressing or ignoring and denying them, in full or in part.

### **National costume dolls over the years**

National costume dolls as a socio-cultural phenomenon are part of popular culture that began before the establishment of the State of Israel, and came to its end in the late 1980s; its halcyon days were between the 1950s and the 1970s. These dolls were made by artists, artisans and craftspeople that used an array of techniques and styles. Most of the doll makers and designers were not born in the country; some of them had had art or artisan education and others had a modicum of knowledge of the field.

The dolls were displayed and sold privately, in souvenir shops or in shops owned by institutional bodies. They were bought as souvenirs, mementoes of a place or an experience, by Israelis and particularly Jewish tourists who took them home with them after they left the country, a scrap of their national homeland in the shape of ornamental dolls that depicted local types, later to be put on display in their faraway homes.

In retrospect, the repertoire of these national costume dolls evokes memories, and perhaps even yearning. The research and the exhibition that followed expanded the scope beyond the nostalgic context and regard these dolls as a symbolic unit that conveys messages and meaning about the period, and the changes that took place over seven decades. The dolls manifest symbols, values and myths that relate to the creation of Israeli identity: nationalism, ethnicity, the melting pot, pluralism and multiculturalism. Presenting and interpreting the doll collection will draw the boundaries of representation and reveal the figures that are included, as well as those which are not, while attempting to answer the question: did these dolls - created over the years -reflect, represent, shape or invent the sought-after imagined and hegemonic Israeliness?

The first costume dolls emerged on the scene in Palestine of the 1920s and disappeared at the end of the 1980s. They were of wide-ranging quality and were manufactured by employing different design techniques. Over seven decades an inner discourse was conducted in the world of these dolls and their production, which related to localism, belonging, and identity. *Sabra*, Yemenite, religious Jews and Arab dolls were designed and produced over the years, however their existence and the extent of their presence was dissimilar. Exploring the national costume dolls reveals **four periods**, and in each of them a strong correspondence between doll-making and far-reaching social, cultural and political processes is evident.

### **The 1920s – the end of '40s: From Jewish-ethnicity to buds of Israeliness**

In the 1920s, when the *yishuv* in Palestine was under the rule of the British Mandate, the first national costume dolls appeared on the scene - an artistic craft which would gain momentum over the years following the establishment of the State several decades later, and particularly after the establishment of the state. In the beginning of the period the dolls represented Jewish - ethnic pluralism. In the 1940s a change took place and their representation focused on burgeoning Israeliness.

Two major artists, albeit dissimilar, left their mark on the field of doll-making during this period: Rivka Stark-Avivi (born in Poland, 1895), and Edith Samuel (born in Germany, 1907).

Rivka Stark-Avivi's dolls manifest diverse ethnic Jewish cultures which were marked in those days in Palestine, particularly in Jerusalem. Her dolls are particularly large, their costumes abounding in detail and cultural characteristics unique to the different ethnic groups, albeit, she often took the liberty to add foreign elements. Stark-Avivi gave room and a prominent place to the representation of women in her work.

Edith Samuel's dolls manifest the buds of Israeliness which corresponded with different types of Israelis she saw in her close environment, mainly young children. These dolls are a combination of the private and the public, the personal and the national. Her point of view was realistic and did not aggrandize. She shifted her eyes to the "others," to the periphery, to those aspects that did not fall in line with the sought-after Israeli archetype of the time. This is manifested in the doll that Samuel made in her own image – a woman who is present on the one hand, but foreign and absent on the other. Samuel's memoirs show that she never felt part of the burgeoning collective, and even revealed a dual and painful attitude toward the country. Nonetheless, she

paved the way for making national costume dolls before and after the establishment of the State of Israel.

### **The 1950s and 1960s: Shaping Israeli Nationalism**

The establishment of the State saw an accelerated process of consolidating and shaping an Israeli national identity, which was manifested in and permeated the field of doll-making.

*“Guests who enter those homes in Israel, decorated with this type of dolls, know that they are facing a special creation of our own, which emanates the fragrance of our country.”* (Shir, 1956)

The first national mission of creating “a new Jew” as the image of the mythological *sabra*, was translated by doll-makers into *halutzim* and *haluzot* (pioneers), members of the socialist youth movements and young people wearing embroidered shirts and blouses. They were presented as those who would put the national values and ideals into effect.

While fostering the model of the sought-after *sabra*, the young state and nascent society adopted the “melting pot” ideology in order to cope with the waves of immigration. Among all the new immigrants, the representation of the Yemenites was particularly striking, and their traditional figures were preserved, by all the doll-makers. Religious Jews and Arabs also enjoyed a prominent place.

Artists and artisans expressed the prevailing ideology. To a great extent they contributed to the reinforcement of these figures due either to identification or economic and marketing considerations, or both.

### **The 1960s and 1970s: Israeliness at a Turning Point**

Definitive events such as the 1967 War, the Yom Kippur War, and the political turnabout, that took place over these two decades, had far-reaching implications on Israeli society and also left their mark on the world of Israeli costume dolls.

Several inter-related trends regarding doll-making in those years may be discerned. Alongside attempts to copy and reproduce *sabra* Israeliness, which had been cultivated and had prospered in the earlier period - the peak of creating Israeli nationalism - religious and ultra-Orthodox trends became stronger on the one hand, and military ones on the other. These were primarily manifested in the main workshops. Concurrently, as part of the quest for new ways of

expression and the strengthening of an individual view, few unique artists designed a different type of doll: no longer dolls made of fabric, termed “soft sculpture”, but wooden ones, some abstract with cubistic allusions. While one was primarily involved in the periphery, Moslem women – Arab and Bedouin women, the other chose to observe Israeli men and women from several sectors, humorously, with a touch of irony, and perhaps even a critical spirit.

### **The 1980s: The End of the National Costume Doll's Era**

The 1980s was a decisive period in which Israeli society became capitalistic, individualistic, and the national and collective ethos declined. The Lebanon War at the beginning of the decade, and the first Intifada which ended it, generated doubts, dilemmas and new questions regarding contemporary Israeli identity. These events, which would intensify over the years, led to disillusionment, maturity and the loss of innocence. Against the background of these significant changes and the disappearance of the mythological *sabra* figure, the need and desire to create and acquire national costume dolls significantly diminished, even among Jewish tourists.

However, the last doll-making factory was purchased and transferred to one of the Kibbutzim, under a new name thanks to the idea of setting up a factory that would provide work for the elderly.

The twenty workers, who were among the older members of the kibbutz, made thousands of dolls every year, which were later sold in shops in Tel Aviv and at tourist sites throughout the country. The doll repertoire was limited, they were overly-decorated and lacked vitality, as customary with souvenir dolls. The first 'Intifada' and in its wake the drop in tourism in the 1990s led to a significant plunge in the demand for these dolls. Toward the end of the 1990s the factory closed down, thus bringing the last attempt to produce Israeli national costume dolls to an end.

### **The Dolls and the Boundaries of Israeliness**

The different types of dolls draw the boundaries of Israeliness that shifted between representation of “us” and of “others.” These concepts are essentially imagined, but also have the capacity to delineate a symbolic border. The key question is: who are “us” and who are “the others,” and what are the prominent representations that were shaped and perceptible over the years. The dolls that represent “us” are always the Israeli *sabra*, bearing Ashkenazi European

features; the dolls that represent “the others,” who are not considered *sabras* and do not match the perception of “us,” are Yemenites, the religious, the ultra-Orthodox and Arabs. The Yemenites represent the biblical world; they preserve tradition, and have not yet merged into the cultural melting pot. The religious and ultra-Orthodox represent the old Jew, the Diaspora, and Eastern Europe. The Arabs represent the quintessential “other”, and are portrayed with a special emphasis on their oriental nature. The exotic oriental characteristics which emerge in the figures of Arab dolls were also transferred to the Yemenite dolls. Among the representations of “us” and the “others” an additional and unique character is discernable – the young Jewish woman carrying a jug.

**"Sabra" dolls** constitute the main and broadest category, comprising young and vivacious men and women with Ashkenazi European features. They gaze straight ahead and seem optimistic, symbolizing the future. The chief figures are girls and boys, members of youth movements, dressed in blue shirts with red ribbons, khaki pants, a *tembel* hat on the boys' heads, and a kerchief tied around the head or neck of the girls. Other young people are dressed in embroidered shirts, allegedly an imitation of Russian embroidery. Some of the young people are holding a spade, carrying a box of oranges on their shoulders, and many have their hands in their pockets.

**"Yemenite" dolls:** The Yemenite men appear in traditional dress, with sidelocks hanging down their face. They are customarily engaged in peddling. The Yemenite women are also dressed traditionally: their heads are covered, and they are wearing embroidered pants. They are often carrying a child or a bundle on their shoulders and sometimes are busy embroidering, braiding or beating on a drum or tambourine.

**"Orthodox Jew" dolls:** The men are depicted in various religious contexts such as laying *tefillin* (phylacteries), carrying the Torah, studying, attending a *Brith Milah* ceremony, etc. The women are seen lighting the Shabbat or Hanukkah candles, the majority wearing their best outfits. A great deal of emphasis was placed on the typical ultra-Orthodox appearance, in most cases the men were wearing a capote, but without a great deal of detail regarding the fine distinctions between one religious stream or another. In one unusual scene, a couple –an ultra-Orthodox man and woman - are seen dancing.

**“Arab” dolls:** The Arab men and women are always seen with traditional characteristics: wearing a *keffiyeh*, the men with a moustache, and an assortment of head coverings for women. In general terms, the Arab men are not engaged in anything specific, except for a few which are seen carrying a basket or smoking a *nargillah*. The Arab women dolls are usually carrying a bundle on their heads.

**"Jug-carrier" dolls** are a distinct expression of the “the biblical Israelite” which is not like the Israeli sabra, nor the Diaspora Jew. The image of the jug-carriers leans heavily on biblical motifs and is based on the figures of Rebecca and Rachel. These dolls connect the Israeli present to the biblical past. The image of the Hebrew jug-carrier is mentioned in contexts tangential to Israeli popular visual art.

### **Artists and creators**

Over seven decades artists, artisans, workshops and institutional bodies populated the field of national costume doll-making and design. With the exception of one artist, none of them were born in Israel, and the majority were women. Alongside the doll-makers participating in this exhibition, numerous women were employed in workshops over the years, playing an important role in this flourishing industry, albeit, they remain anonymous. The methods of doll-making were varied. All the artists and craftspeople produced different and individual characteristics, which made each of them unique. Some similarity can be seen in the molding techniques of faces and bodies, and in the use of wire skeletons.

The majority of the artists worked independently, but they sold their products to shops or institutional bodies.

The world of doll-making shifted between different influences: the commercial and artistic, the creative and imitative, the stereotype and the authentic.

## Epilogue

The National costume dolls are souvenirs that embody a partial, concrete, and imagined memory of the story of the country – either real or imaginary.

In the beginning, the dolls, which were made in Palestine, prior to the establishment of the state of Israel, gave expression to a multi-cultural viewpoint and a diverse reality from the ethnic point of view. As the years went by, diversity gradually lessened and the dolls were charged with ideological, national and hegemonic elements, which restricted the boundaries of Israeliness. The dolls became more stereotypical, to the point that not only did they not match the complex Israeli reality, but they also ceased to express the longed-for reality.

## Reference:

Shenhav-Keller, Shelly, 1993. "The Israeli Souvenir: Its Text and Context". *Annals of Tourism Research*. Vol.20(1):182-196.

2006. "Souvenirs – Cultural Invention, Meaning and Authenticity:  
The Case of "Maskit". *Motav – Journal of Art*, Vol. 14. pp.41-47.  
(Hebrew)

2011. *A Land and Its Dolls – Israeli Souvenirs and National Identity*.  
Eretz-Israel Museum, Tel-Aviv.

Shir, Miriam, "Decorating the home in Israeli style," *Davar*, 28.2.1956 (Hebrew)

Dr. Shelly Shenhav-Keller is an anthropologist, researcher of museums & curator.

shellysk@bezeqint.net

