The Barbie Doll: Profile of an American Icon

Barbie Millicent Roberts

An iconic American doll was born fifty-four years ago during the Golden Age of the French haute couture, a time when young girls everywhere dreamed of wearing the latest fashions from Paris.

Like couture clothing, Barbie’s fashions were custom made with hand sewn buttons, seams and hems. Her original clothes even had real pockets and linings!

The Collector

[Visiting Mecca in Eden]

Eden, NY - Tucked away in the back of a cozy insurance agent’s workplace, eighteen boxes stacked neat and high contain nothing close to office supplies. Instead, they hold one hundred-eighty Barbie dolls and various Barbie collectibles, all in mint condition. This is the majority of Kathleen (Kathy) Mecca’s Barbie collection, from years 1991 to 2009. On why she collects Barbies: “Oh I just loved them! I don’t know why,” she gushed. And she maintains her Barbies in tip-top shape by keeping most of her dolls just as they come – packaged.

Kathy describes Barbie as a toy that enters every girl’s life at some point. For Kathy, that point occurred one Christmas in 1962, when she was eight years old. It was the first Barbie doll ever produced by Mattel. That Barbie ventured out of her box. “She (Barbie) went to work as a nurse, came back in the afternoon to play tennis, and at night she went out,” said Kathy.

Perhaps it’s Barbie’s reflection of girlhood that so intrigued Kathy. Dressing Barbie is a tedious feat – much like how ladies put in effort to dress. “She wasn’t an easy doll to put together. We (Kathy and her friends) took time to put her clothes on and off when we switched our Barbies into new outfits,” said Kathy.

When asked about Barbie’s evolution over time, Kathy felt that Barbie has remained the same more than she has changed. For instance, Barbie’s appearance and styles may have evolved, but Barbie’s attitude towards fashion is constant. “People don’t get dressed up anymore. They go out casual all the time, wearing shorts to dinner,” Kathy laughed. But Barbie will always dress to impress.

Fifty years have passed since Kathy got her first Barbie doll, and she still receives dolls from her mother Patricia Mecca (see The Doll Finder) every now and then. “I told her to stop! But she can’t help it. We are addicted to collecting Barbie; she’s just so pretty.”

One thing is certain – the appearance of Box 19 will hardly be surprising.

This project aims to re-discover history through one of America’s iconic toys - the Barbie doll. There has been a considerable amount of change in Barbie’s packaging, marketing, and wardrobe ever since her inception, and the goal is to analyze the evolution of societal trends Barbie has embodied over the years, as well as her representation in popular culture.

The project will capture photographs of the collection and develop a profile of Kathy Mecca, a Barbie collector ever since the doll was introduced in early ’60s. The collection includes 275 Barbie dolls in mint condition, all of which offer glimpses into popular culture with themes of Hollywood, fashion over the decades, and theme-based dolls (such as Architect Barbie), to demonstrate the manufactured desires of young women.

By examining the collection and profiling the collector, this project will examine how this alluring icon developed, and its impact on popular culture.

The Doll Finder

Patricia (Pat) Mecca is Kathy’s mother, and the finder of most of Kathy’s Barbie collection, yet Pat insists she didn’t get Kathy her first doll. “Santa did,” she said.

Pat started buying dolls for Kathy fifty years ago, and would give them to her daughter as presents for Christmas, birthdays, and even after trips as souvenirs, “I buy them whenever I can find them.”

Hunting grounds include Toys R Us, Wal-Mart and other department stores. Pat’s wish? For Mattel to make a senior Barbie resembling her. One that has red hair and drives a Turquoise T-Bird convertible. “They (Mattel) must go along with the ages!” she chuckled.

The Collector

Patricia Mecca (Pat) (2013), Barbie’s maker Mattel has a market capitalization of $14.4 billion.

Luxury Comes In A Box

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References

