



Tips For Conserving Your Composition Doll



Those "indestructible" dolls you got as a child in the 1950s or before may be destroying themselves.

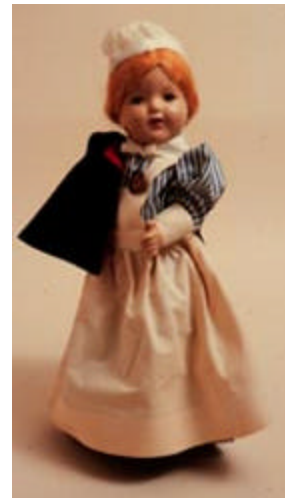
The dolls with "sleep eyes" that closed when they were laid down were most often made from composition materials compressed and molded by the manufacturers from a variety of materials. Contents could range from wood pulp to the previous day's floor sweepings at the factory.

The interior of the dolls were often made of materials different from those on the dolls's exteriors. As a result, the different materials react differently to changes in temperature and humidity, resulting in breaks and cracks in the dolls.



Nevertheless, Paul Storch, objects conservator at the Minnesota Historical Society, has some general suggestions for preserving your composition doll.

1. Store in the main part of your home, rather than the basement or attic which could have extremes in temperature and humidity.
2. Use acid-free, lignin-free, archival-quality boxes for storage if possible. These are often sold in art-supply and museum stores and contain no residues that could affect the dolls.
3. Protect from dust and direct sunlight when displayed. Anything organic in the materials could



be affected by the sunlight, and the shellac on the surface should be protected from dust.

4. Store sleep-eye dolls face down so the eyes are open. Eyes are kept closed by the use of weights which can damage the dolls' faces over time.
5. Avoid do-it-yourself remedies to fix dolls that are already cracked. Chemicals and other treatments could do more damage. Your goal should be to preserve the dolls from further deterioration.



In his study of 14 dolls donated to the Minnesota Historical Society by the Ancker Hospital Alumni Association, he found that the dolls deteriorate in strangely unpredictable ways.

Storch said he has no way of predicting which dolls are more likely to deteriorate faster than others. The main variable may be what they are made of, and those materials varied, perhaps daily, even from the same manufacturer.

Five or six of the dolls look as though they came from the same manufacturer, and they do not have the paint cracked. Others have been repaired and re-strung to fix joints connecting arms and legs. The means and materials used to stabilize the cracking paint on the deteriorated dolls are beyond what is available to the non-professional conservator.

Face of 1940s doll



Doll's head with sleep-eye mechanism



Interior of doll's head showing sleep-eye mechanism in the open-eyes position

**Paul S. Storch, objects conservator
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