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Doll Dressing
September 16, 2026–January 3, 2027
Curated by Colleen Hill

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Cover: Moschino by Jeremy Scott, jacket and skirt, spring 2017
Flap: Lirika Matoshi, "Apartment Coat," 2024
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Doll Dressing



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People of all ages enjoy making, collecting, and playing with dolls. Among the innumerable types of dolls, fashion dolls can be characterized as human figures that promote and/or reflect a fashionable appearance. They are not otherwise strictly defined or standardized. They come in many sizes, are crafted from a variety of materials, and can appear as any gender, though they typically represent women or girls. The perceived ages of the dolls, as well as their intended audience, also vary. Fashion dolls can represent contemporary trends or fashionable dress from the past. Yet there is an important distinction between the fashion doll and a doll who is merely dressed: A fashion doll’s clothing is meant to be removed and changed.

Fashion dolls are everywhere, whether we realize it or not: Life-size display mannequins are probably the most common example. Although many other fashion dolls are small in stature, their impact on history is immeasurable. As early as the 14th century, dolls operated as miniature fashion models. They were shipped around Europe and, later, abroad, communicating the latest styles in three-dimensional detail. By the early 20th century, dolls were not merely sharing the latest trends but setting them. This concept, defined in this exhibition as doll dressing, encompasses clothing and accessories, hair and makeup, and even movement and gestures that take their cue from dolls.

Studies have shown that many women dislike being referred to as “dolls,” so why would they want to dress like one? Notions of a doll-like appearance are rooted in the look of 19th-century fashion dolls, which represented European and North American beauty standards—an ideal



society has long told women they should strive to achieve. Typical features include a light complexion, large eyes, rosy cheeks, and a small nose and mouth, in addition to a fashionable figure draped in high-end clothing. Both fashion and fashion dolls have been scorned for their frivolity, as well as their promotion of consumption, normative beauty standards, and negative gender stereotypes. Onlookers frequently misinterpret the thought and motivation behind doll-like fashions. They have been viewed as regressive, vapid, or simply bizarre. Yet, as *Doll Dressing* argues, both fashion and dolls can also be considered in a positive light.

Philosopher and cultural critic Walter Benjamin thought it was perfectly natural for adults to retain their interest in dolls. “This is not simply a regression to childhood,” he asserted. “To be sure, play is always liberating.” Many designers first displayed their fashion talent by making clothing for dolls, and some have carried this childhood activity into their professional lives. Miniature versions of runway creations are charming expressions of technical virtuosity, but making scaled-down fashions may also be borne of practicality or necessity. Moreover, finding inspiration in a doll’s wardrobe evokes a sense of nostalgia, awakening memories of childhood play.

Doll dressing can be playful, youthful, luxurious, and fantastical. It flirts with a variety of looks and ideas, but several recurring design elements emerge. Ruffles and full skirts possess an old-fashioned appeal that we can trace to the fashion doll’s Victorian heyday. Embellishments such as bows, sequins, and lace are stereotypically “feminine” and evocative of the styles that many little girls covet. Doll-inspired designs



favor pastel colors—especially pink, which was associated with girlhood by the mid-20th century. Oversize or awkward shapes mimic the way clothing fits over inflexible and sometimes strangely proportioned doll bodies. Similarly, the two-dimensional paper doll inspires designs that lay “flat” over their wearer’s form. The fascination that many of us hold for miniatures is awakened by clothing that evokes dollhouses, whereas styles inspired by broken dolls can arouse both fear and fondness.

Although doll dressing often adopts elements of a stereotypically doll-like aesthetic, it also challenges and subverts ideas of what a doll can be. An inclusive view of race, age, sexuality, and gender fosters expressions of personal style and creativity. The deeper pleasures of doll dressing—and their associated elements of rebellion, self-assurance, empowerment, and fun—are not always visible on their pretty surfaces. In reality, fashion allows us to play with being dolls on our own terms.

—Colleen Hill, curator

1. Sindy doll by Pedigree, circa 1978, wearing “Summery Days” dress by Foale and Tuffin, 1963
2. Courtney Love by Nasty Gal, dress, 2016
3. Fashion Brand Company, dress reimagining “Fancy Free” Barbie dress at human scale, 2025
4. Rootstein, Twiggy mannequin (reproduction of 1967 design), wearing Twiggy London Girl dress, 1966
5. Maison Martin Margiela, “Doll” sweater, fall 1994
6. Loewe, shoes, spring 2023
7. Conner Ives, “Protect the Dolls” T-shirt, fall 2025
8. Celine Homme, “Boy Doll” jacket, fall 2022
9. Marc Jacobs, dress, fall 2024