Aimee Hinds, "Entry on: Barbie® Goddess Series (Series): Barbie® Doll as Medusa by Mattel, Inc. , Linda Kyaw ", peer-reviewed by Susan Deacy and Elizabeth Hale. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2020). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/1064. Entry version as of October 30, 2026.

Mattel, Inc. , Linda Kyaw

Barbie® Goddess Series (Series): Barbie® Doll as Medusa

United States (2008)

TAGS: Athena Medusa Poseidon





We are still trying to obtain permission for posting the original cover.

General information	
Title of the work	Barbie® Goddess Series (Series): Barbie® Doll as Medusa
Country of the First Edition	United States of America
Country/countries of popularity	Worldwide
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	2008
First Edition Details	Mattel, *Barbie® as Medusa*, 2008.
Official Website	barbie.mattel.com (accessed: August 12, 2020).
Genre	Collectables*, Dolls*
Target Audience	Young adults (on the box Mattel suggest that this doll is for adult collectors, which they define as those aged 14 and up)
Author of the Entry	Aimee Hinds, University of Roehampton aimee.hinds89@gmail.com
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Creators

Mattel, Inc. (Company)

Logo retrieved from Wikipedia, public domain (accessed: January 11, 2022).

Mattel Barbie

Originally launched in 1959, Barbie was founded by businesswoman, inventor, and co-owner of Mattel, Ruth Handler as an opportunity for girls to play with dolls that allowed them a wider range of imaginative roles, in line with the range of toys available to boys at the time. From the early 1960s, Barbie has had over 200 careers to date.

Source:

barbie.mattel.com (accessed: January 27, 2020).

Prepared by Aimee Hinds, University of Roehampton, aimee.hinds89@gmail.com



Linda Kyaw

Linda Kyaw has been Product Design Manager at Mattel since 2015. Before that, she was an Associate Designer and Face Designer for Mattel. She has an Associate of Arts from the Fashion Institute of Design and Marketing. Kyaw has designed a wide range of dolls, including Goddess Series (2008-2010) and Barbie as Cleopatra (2010), as well as some of the recent Dolls of the World dolls and the Birthday and Holiday Wishes dolls.

Source:

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Linkedin profile (accessed: August 7, 2020).

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Additional information

Summary

This collector's edition doll depicts Barbie as Medusa. The doll was the first of the Goddess Series (2008-2010); although in mythology Medusa is not mortal, she is not a goddess herself. The series is fashion focused, rather than trying to produce authentic versions of the mythological figures it represents. Like the other dolls in the Barbie Goddess Series, Barbie as Medusa is first and foremost a fashion doll, designed to be admired as a fashionable representation of ancient myth rather than an accurate one. This doll is not Medusa, but Barbie in a Medusa costume which is more about fashion than mythology.

The text on the box reads:

"Greek mythology – centuries old – tells the story of Medusa. Born a nymph, Medusa grew to be a beautiful woman. One day, Poseidon, the god of the Sea followed her to Athena's temple. The Goddess Athena, enraged by their transgression, transformed Medusa's lovely face to a frightening mask and her beautiful hair to snakes. Powerful and cruel, Medusa, from then on, turned all who gazed upon her to stone.

The famous myth of the infamous Medusa inspires a wonderful re-interpretation. Barbie® doll as Medusa wears a green corset and chiffon fishtail skirt. Long, auburn curls play against the golden snake arm cuffs and necklace, which foretell the serpents that will become her hair. Ancient myth and contemporary fashion combine to make a "magical" doll."

Analysis

This Barbie as Medusa doll depicts Medusa before she is transformed into a monster, thus revealing that the designer's sources (if ancient) were more Ovidian (it is not until the Roman period that the Medusa myth develops the element of her rape and Athena's punishment, which we get from Ovid's Metamorphoses 4.791-803) than Homeric (our earliest literary references to Medusa, in which she appears as a horrifying head on Athena's aegis [Iliad 5.848-850]). However, it is likely that any the doll was inspired by more recognisable post-classical receptions, such as Peter Paul Rubens' 1617 oil painting The Severed Head of Medusa or Caravaggio's 1596 oil Medusa, both of which depict human-looking (if not beautiful) Medusas, or even the

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Versace logo (in which Medusa does not have snakes for hair).
Barbie's Medusa wears a fishtail dress with snakeskin style patterns, along with snake earrings, shoes and necklace; her hair, which hangs in thick, curly ropes, also suggests Medusa's snakes. Her clothing does not reference ancient styles, except for her shoes which are similar to a modern, gladiator style sandal. Her eyes are green with slit pupils, mimicking snake eyes. She has a gold snake wrapped around each arm, each which has red, ruby style eyes. The liberal use of gold in her costume, as well as the faux green and red gems, signal her divine status, although Medusa is not in mythology counted among the goddesses. The box for this doll is patterned with a snakeskin effect, also tying in to Medusa's mythology and clearly providing visual signposts for her identity.

The doll owes most of her visual style to the Minoan snake goddess figurines (see Leeming 2013:89–90) for a brief comparison of Medusa with other snake deities), rather than any visual representation of Medusa herself, particularly in her posture and the positioning of the snakes around her arms. The representation of Medusa pre-transformation is an interesting way of presenting the Medusa story without the complications of her rape and punishment. While these dolls are collectors' items and not meant to be played with, they are part of a hugely influential youth culture. Presenting Medusa as a human, rather than a monster, allows the doll to illustrate a moment in the Medusa myth where she is both associated with her most famous attribute – her snakes – but not with the lesser known aspects of her tale, that of rape by Poseidon and victim-blaming punishment by Athena. This allows the doll to tell selective parts of the myth – which is difficult given the decision to present the beautiful Medusa – whilst shielding their younger audience from difficult topics.
Like the other dolls in this series (including Barbie as Athena and Aphrodite, also surveyed on this database), Barbie as Medusa turns the mythology and identity of Medusa into a sensual costume; Barbie's Medusa is a femme fatale. This is especially problematic given that, as stated on the website, this is Medusa before Medusa has snakes for hair, and, in the wider context of her myth, suggests that Medusa's rape and subsequent punishment could be her own fault for flaunting her sexuality. The text on the box does nothing to quell this; the story as told here leaves room for Medusa's complicity, her rape being referred to as "their transgression". While Athena's punishment is not justified, the reference to Medusa's power and cruelty in her transformed state suggests that she has proven to have deserved her

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eventual transformation. Crucially, the explanation of Athena's punishment of Medusa for a vague (but guessable) transgression misses a teaching moment; a reference to Medusa's innocence and/or Athena's cruelty would go some way to alleviating the potential implied victim-blaming, which is of particular importance given the young audience of the doll. While the doll itself is typical of Barbie's presentation of gender and sexuality, and certainly fits with the other dolls in the Goddess series, in this case it is the wording together with the doll which causes the tension.

Despite Barbie's Medusa being a costume, there is no room for the consumer or collector to change her clothing – as with the collectors' doll in general, the doll is not meant to be removed from the box. Thus, the collector must collect the other dolls both to contextualise this doll as Medusa (the Athena doll is especially closely connected through iconography, as well as story), and to allow Barbie to try out the other costumes. This has an effect on the target audience, as both cost and the low level of engagement with the doll itself will disengage younger children, although the 'grown-up' element of the collector dolls makes them attractive to older children and young adults. Like the Aphrodite doll (also surveyed in this database), the doll chooses to present Medusa through fashion rather than more easily recognisable iconography (such as snakes for hair), bringing the doll into line with Barbie's recognisably femininity, while retaining a distance from the relatively de-sexualised toy dolls.

Like the other Goddess dolls, Medusa is pale skinned, reflecting a long tradition of representing Medusa as white, despite some sources placing her outside of Greece (for example, Lucan's Bellum Civile places her in Libya). The representation of Medusa as white here is likely informed by post-classical source materials, but also illustrates a move to keep the Goddess Series consistent, in a similar way to the presentation of a white "Egyptian Queen" in the Great Eras Collection (Milnor, 2005: 230). This consistency ties in with the idea of Barbie in a costume, and with the commodification of the collectors' dolls in the series as items which must be collected together to be contextualised.

Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts

Athena Medusa Poseidon

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Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Animals Appearances Fashion Femininity Gender Gender expectations/construction Gender, female Girls Historical figures Play* Pop culture references Religious beliefs Transformation

Further Reading

About Barbie (accessed: January 27, 2020).

Barbie doll as Medusa (accessed: January 27, 2020).

Leeming, David, *Medusa in the Mirror of Time,* London: Reaktion Books, 2013.

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