Aimee Hinds, "Entry on: Barbie® Doll as Cleopatra 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/1065. Entry version as of November 05, 2026.

Mattel, Inc. , Linda Kyaw

Barbie® Doll as Cleopatra

United States (2010)

TAGS: Cleopatra VII Egypt





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

General information	
Title of the work	Barbie® Doll as Cleopatra
Country of the First Edition	United States of America
Country/countries of popularity	Worldwide
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	2010
First Edition Details	Mattel, *Barbie® Doll as Cleopatra*, 2010.
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)
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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 Cleopatra (distinct from the similar dolls which depict Elizabeth Taylor as Cleopatra from 2000, the 1993 Egyptian Queen doll and the 2001 Princess of the Nile doll). Barbie wears a stylised version of Egyptian dress, decorated with Egyptian-style motifs.

The text on the back of the box reads:

"Amongst the leaders of history, Cleopatra VII stands out – the quintessential woman of great beauty, power, and strength. The last pharaoh of her dynasty, she was known as the "Queen of the Nile". Her charm, mystique, and love of pageantry fascinated her populace, who adored her and devotedly referred to her as Philopatris or, "she who loves her country".

This striking portrayal of Barbie doll as Cleopatra captures the nobility of a divine queen. She wears a dazzling cape and skirt with exotic green and black design featuring a golden rope embellishment. Cleopatra's extravagant headdress lends a regal air with its ornate design with scarab and cobra details. The faux jewel and golden earrings, dagger, and scepter reveal the pharaoh's exotic origin. History and striking elegance meet to create an extraordinary doll."

Analysis

The Barbie website details very little contextual information for the Barbie as Cleopatra doll. Unlike other toys (for example, the Lego Minifigures), the amount the consumer will get out of the doll as reception is dependent upon their own prior knowledge of the history and myth-making around Cleopatra VII as a figure. Whilst the doll is not intended to be educational to children in the way that the non-collectible dolls are, like the Great Era dolls (the series from which the earlier Egyptian Queen doll is drawn), historicity is important here (as indicated by the wording on the box), as a way of marketing the educational possibilities of Barbie to adults (Milnor, 2005: 218). For young adults, the specific 'facts' will likely add to what they may have learned about Cleopatra at school (for example, the reference to *Philopatris*, a moniker which may not even refer to Egypt, but to Cleopatra's Macedonian heritage [Bingen, 2007: 57–62]). The ideas about Cleopatra's "charm, mystique and love of pageantry" come to us

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largely from her characterisation in Plutarch's *Life of Antony*, which has inspired many receptions, perhaps most notably – in regards to this doll – orientalist paintings. Compare, for example, the Cleopatra in Alexander Cabanal's 1887 *Cleopatra Testing Poison on Condemned Prisoners* with the presentation of this doll, which, while it is clearly inspired by modern fashion, owes more to oriental fantasies of Cleopatra and Hellenistic Egypt than to historical reality.

One of the most clearly important aspects of the Barbie as Cleopatra doll is her costume; these collectors' dolls are meant to be displayed, not played with, and thus her dress is a key aspect of the product. Barbie wears a large, ornate headdress, a stylised version of a nemes headdress. The nemes would have been made from cloth, and Barbie's version closely references the funerary mask of Tutankhamun which preserves the headdress in solid gold. The headdress comes over the shoulders and, in Barbie's case, ends in two golden wings which also serve to cover her breasts in lieu of a top. The shape and function of Barbie's headdress, which displays her hairline, allowing for her hair to be visible along with her elaborate earrings, illustrates the relation to western orientalism in the design. While the nemes is visual shorthand in pop-culture for Egyptian royalty, it could reference a masculine style, but has been manipulated to be entirely feminine. Barbie's Cleopatra is sexy *and* powerful. Like all Barbies, this doll's most important characteristic is her femininity, a facet that is constructed via the familiar Barbie doll shape and face and through the costume, the sexiness of which attempts to leave no doubt as to the intended gender (in terms of Barbie herself – while the 'toy' dolls are targeted at girls, the collectable dolls have a more inclusive target audience in age and gender).

The rest of Barbie's costume similarly bears little relation to real, historical Hellenistic Egyptian clothing, and relies on the accessories to guide the consumer to the vision of Egyptian queenship. Visual motifs include scarabs, cobras and a liberally used eye (visible on the shoes and earrings); this is likely meant to represent the eye of Horus, but lacking other visual cues its intentional meaning is unclear (it is also potentially a mis-understanding of how the eye of Ra is represented visually). The accessories themselves – especially the dagger and sceptre – feed into an image of Cleopatra as a dangerous queen. A more positive association is seen in the iconography of the sceptre, which is topped with a goddess figure, presumably that of the winged Isis, Egyptian goddess of women, kingship and the sky. Isis' inclusion neatly links the doll into the Hellenistic Egyptian tradition,

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and to Cleopatra VII who styled herself as a new Isis. Again, while the costume draws on modern fashion, it makes a somewhat genuine attempt at engagement with historical imagery, if not accuracy. Barbie's fantasy world and historical reality exist uneasily together within this doll.

As with some of the other more recent classically themed Barbies, the presentation of Barbie as Cleopatra reflects a new approach to the classical world by Barbie and Mattel which draws extensively on pop-culture and Barbie's long association with fashion, as compared to previous versions of these dolls which are presented in a more 'historical' way (see entries on Barbie as Medusa, Athena and Aphrodite, all surveyed on this database and dating to around the same time as this doll). This is also connected to these Barbies being Barbie herself in a costume: Barbie has a long history of roleplaying, with the ethos behind the doll's inception being that girls would be able to imagine themselves in various roles (About Barbie, accessed: August 12, 2020). As a collector's doll, this doll does not invite the owner to take part in that roleplaying with Barbie, but in this case Barbie becomes a mediator between the role of Cleopatra and the consumer (see Milnor, 2005: 223) Barbie *isn't* Cleopatra, but as the consumer is not meant to role-play Cleopatra through engaging with the doll through play, Barbie plays Cleopatra for them.

Barbie as Cleopatra is fairly light skinned although cosmetically made up to appear racially ambiguous, maybe reflecting an awareness of racial difference (or perhaps a desire to differentiate the doll from her similar predecessors, who range visually from white [Egyptian Queen], to African [Princess of the Nile]). This is interesting in terms of the doll's target market, and Mattel's commodification of diversity (Milnor, 2005: 232), and suggests that there is a deliberate attempt to market this doll to a wide audience. As a collectors' doll, the audience stretches to adults including men, although as Milnor (2005: 216) points out, the distinction of the dolls being for the over 14s only serves to try to market them as not being toys, despite them being exactly that. Unlike the dolls that are marketed for play, the overt sexuality presented in this doll may be an aspect for marketing to young adults and older consumers, as a way of demarking the doll from more demure versions suitable for younger children.

Cleopatra VII Egypt

Classical, Mythological,

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Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Fashion Femininity Gender Gender expectations/construction Gender, female Girls Historical figures Play* Pop culture references

Further Reading

About Barbie (accessed: January 27, 2020).

Barbie Doll as Cleopatra (accessed: January 27, 2020).

Bingen, Jean and Roger Bagnall, ed., *Hellenistic Egypt: Monarchy, Society, Economy, Culture,* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007.

Milnor, Kristina, “Barbie® as Grecian Goddess™ and Egyptian Queen™: Ancient Women’s History by Mattel®”, *Helios* 32.2 (2005): 215–233.

Plantzos, Dimitris, “The Iconography of Assimilation: Isis and Royal Imagery on Ptolemaic Seal Impressions”, in Panagiotis Iossif, Andrzej S. Chankowski and Catherine C Lorber, eds., *More Than Men, Less Than Gods: On Royal Cult and Imperial Worship. Proceedings of the International Colloquium Organized by the Belgian School at Athens (November 1–2, 2007),* Studia Hellenistica, 51. Leuven: Peeters, (2011): 389–415.

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