Aimee Hinds, "Entry on: Barbie® Goddess Series (Series): Barbie® Doll as Athena 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/1066. Entry version as of November 11, 2026.

Mattel, Inc. , Linda Kyaw

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

United States (2010)

TAGS: Athena Gorgon(s) Jason Medusa Odysseus / Ulysses





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 Athena
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 Athena*, 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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This Project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme under grant agreement No 681202, *Our Mythical Childhood… The Reception of Classical Antiquity in Children's and Young Adults' Culture in Response to Regional and Global Challenges*, ERC Consolidator Grant (2016–2021), led by Prof. Katarzyna Marciniak, Faculty of "Artes Liberales" of the University of Warsaw.

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 Athena (distinct from the Goddess of Wisdom Barbie from 2000, which is not attributed to a specific goddess). Barbie wears a stylised armour-style ball gown, thigh-high gold boots and a floor length cloak. She is armed with a gold and silver spear and shield, and wears a helmet with a long plume, echoing her long black hair which falls beneath in a ponytail. Unlike the Goddess of Wisdom doll, the Athena doll is presented in a warrior-like costume.

The text on her box reads:

"Athena: great Olympian goddess if ancient Greek cities. She was the goddess of wisdom, war, the arts and justice and favorite child of Zeus, ruler of the gods. Athena sprang to life, fully grown and fully armored. Always involved in the affairs of mortals, Athena guided Odysseus home from the Trojan War and helped Jason and the Argonauts on their epic quest for the Golden Fleece.

Athena's enduring tale inspires a glorious reinterpretation. Barbie® doll as Athena wears a silvery iridescent gown, completed by a flowing ombre chiffon cape and chain belt. The golden breast-plate features images of Athena's symbol, the owl. An elaborately detailed shield and spear reinforce her fierce reputation. The ancient legend of a mighty goddess is reimagined for today."

Analysis

The Barbie website gives a few details about Athena, including that she 'allegedly' leaped fully grown from Zeus' head, and these are supplemented by the blurb included on the box. While the text supplied with the doll suggests some of Athena's attributes beyond her role in war, the doll itself is almost entirely centred around this aspect. Barbie as Athena is clothed in a chainmail style dress, with spear, shield and a breastplate which mimics Athena's famous aegis. Her divine status is made clear through the liberal use of gold, silver and ruby effect in her armour, spear and shield. The doll is a self-conscious piece of classical reception, letting the consumer know exactly which mythical figure is represented, although the lack of contextual decorative elements (for example, Greek key motif, Greek style clothing or lettering) mean that it is not immediately clear for

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someone without prior knowledge which culture she belongs to.

In both ancient literature and visual representations of mythology, Athena's *aegis* and/or shield often depict the gorgon Medusa (the Gorgoneion, see Deacy and Villing, 2009: 111); an attempt has been made here to imitate this. Athena's shield is decorated with Medusa but not with the Gorgoneion: the image is of Barbie as Medusa, another doll in the same collection which depicts Medusa pre-transformation. It is captioned with her name in ancient Greek (AΘHNA). Her body armour, which is formed of a chest-piece or necklace that sits high around the neck, and a formed bikini-style breastplate, carries two depictions of owls where we might usually expect to find the Gorgoneion – one owl head in the centre of the chest-piece, the other an owl head in the centre of the breastplate, of which the wings form the rest of the shape. Owls also adorn her shoulder plates. All of the depicted owls are fierce and red-eyed and seem to conflate Athena's owl motif with the Gorgoneion.

The placement of the simplified Gorgoneion type owl motif on the shoulders of her armour is almost entirely arbitrary; the point of the gorgon's head was to petrify enemies, hence its placement on the aegis (in this case, the breastplate and chest-piece). Athena is commonly identified with the owl as a goddess of wisdom (Eason, 2008:71), although it is only these owl motifs that make this clear here, where she is presented almost solely as a goddess of war. Although the designer of this doll clearly understands Athena's attributes, the conflation of the owl - representative of wisdom - and the Gorgoneion - to strike terror into enemies – undermines the representation of both of these aspects in this doll.

The war element of Athena's character is simplified and over-represented, as might be expected, and her other attributes are unclear from her presentation here. The box is decorated with flames, and Barbie as Athena carries a shield and spear, as commonly found in ancient representations, as well as wearing a helmet. However, her armour-like dress is not typical (Athena is usually depicted in a peplos, a garment closely associated with Athena through the Great Panathenaia festival and through her role as a goddess of weaving). Barbie as Athena also wears a red and white cloak, which gives the impression of having been worn on the battlefield and soaked up blood. The strong element of combat seems to be offset by Barbie's femininity, displayed through her 'fashion' dress, heavy make-up, high boots and stylised armour. Athena is typically shown as being a full

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Corinthian style helmet pushed back off her face. Barbie as Athena's helmet is cut out to better show her face (closer in style to a Chalcidian type helmet) and has a long, regal plume that echoes Barbie's own long hair, which falls in a black ponytail.

Like other Barbies of this period (including the others in this series, Aphrodite and Medusa, and the 2010 Barbie as Cleopatra doll, all surveyed in this database), facets of the character Barbie is playing have been over-feminised to downplay the possibility of Barbie being aligned with masculinity. Unlike the ancient Greek mythical Athena, Barbie is definitively womanly, and the focus on her femininity offsets any potential masculine influence brought in by her connections with battle and war. Even the Medusa on her shield is decisively feminine, being consciously depicted as a woman, rather than a monster. This fits with Barbie's constant focus on femininity and her unambiguous representation as a woman – the mythology has been altered to fit Barbie's narrative, rather than the other way around. The references to Athena's mythology in the box text relate the helpful Athena (in this case, providing aid to Jason and Odysseus), rather than the vengeful Athena (who so often employed her wrath against women, including Medusa). This perhaps reflects Barbie's relationships – in avoiding presenting Barbie's Athena as an antagonist to women, her relationship with male heroes is paralleled by Barbie's (decidedly chaste) relationship with Ken. She is presented similarly in some ways to the Athena of Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* series (also surveyed on this database): Riordan's Athena has a child, negating her status as a virgin goddess but allowing her, through her reproductive capabilities, a definitive status as a woman, one which is not necessarily allowed by Athena's mythology. This doll skirts around overt sexuality but achieves the same end through ultra-feminised dress, accentuating the breasts and sporting stereotypically feminine clothing items such as the thigh-high, high heeled boots (some of which, rather ironically for Barbie, has also become stereotypical costume of gender fluidity through pop-culture representations of, for example, drag queens). Both representations use narrow and stereotypical depictions of gender to define Athena as Woman. For Barbie, this directly taps into the consumer angle, preventing the loss of Barbie's recognisably feminine brand and utilising her recognisable figure and face to sell Athena as a powerful woman.

It is probably worth remembering that this doll seeks to depict Barbie as Athena, and not a straightforward representation of Athena herself; thus, while Athena's most famous attributes are present, they are no

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more than window dressing. Barbie's Athena costume is about fashion, not mythology, hence the ball-gown like dress and her jewellery-like armour. However, this costume is recognisably Athena, and while shallowly applied, Athena's attributes have been identifiably included. As with some of the other more recent classically themed Barbies (see entries on Barbie as Medusa, Cleopatra and Aphrodite, all surveyed on this database and dating to around the same time as this doll), Barbie as Athena draws extensively on pop-culture to reinterpret mythology through Barbie's famous association with fashion. This reflects a new approach to the classical world by Barbie and Mattel, as compared to previous versions of these dolls which are not so fashion focused. Through Barbie's fashion costume, this doll (intended to stay in its box on display, and not to be played with) mediates between classical mythology (as packaged in the doll) and the consumer (see Milnor, 2005: 223). Thus Barbie can continue her history of roleplaying, whereby girls can imagine themselves in various roles (About Barbie, accessed: August 12, 2020), as she plays Athena on behalf of the consumer. As a collectors' doll, the audience for these collector's dolls is inclusive of adults of all genders, 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.

Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Athena Gorgon(s) Jason Medusa Odysseus / Ulysses
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Fashion Femininity Gender Gender expectations/construction Gender, female Girls Play* Pop culture references Religious beliefs

Further Reading

About Barbie (accessed: January 27, 2020).

Barbie as Athena (accessed: January 27, 2020).

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