

**Exclusive!**

# The Real Low Down on Kewpee Dolls!

Kewpie is a brand of dolls and figurines that were initially conceived as comic strip characters by artist and writer Rose O'Neill. The illustrated cartoons, appearing as baby cupid characters, began to gain popularity after the publication of O'Neill's comic strips in 1909, and O'Neill began to illustrate and sell paper doll versions of the Kewpies. The characters were first produced as bisque dolls in Waltershausen, Germany beginning in 1912, and became extremely popular in the early twentieth century. The Kewpie dolls were initially made out of bisque exclusively, but composition versions were introduced in the 1920s and celluloid versions were manufactured in the following decades. In 1949, Effanbee created the first hard plastic versions of the dolls, and soft rubber and vinyl versions were produced by Cameo Co. and Jesco between the 1960s and 1990s.

The earlier bisque and composition versions of Kewpie dolls are widely sought-after by antique and doll collectors, who especially want those hand-signed by O'Neill. Kewpies should not be confused with the baby-like Billiken figures that debuted in 1908.

As photographs became more commonplace in advertising, the prominence of Kewpies in the marketing circuit began to wane. O'Neill returned to Missouri, where she died purportedly impoverished of complications from a series of strokes in 1944. Despite the lessening in popularity, Kewpies continued to be manufactured for the majority of the century, including hard plastic versions, as well as all-bisque replicas of the original Kewpies, produced by Jesco and Cameo Co. in the 1960s until the 1990s. These

reproduction Kewpies lack the heart-shaped decal that distinguishes the original, older versions.

According to *200 Years of Dolls* (fourth edition), a 10-inch Kewpie with a bisque head, composition body, and glass eyes today is worth \$6,500, while a 20-inch doll is valued at \$20,000. Many of the original, small-sized German-produced bisque Kewpies (circa 1912-1915) range from \$200-\$500 among collectors. Composition Kewpies range from \$100-\$300, while celluloid versions (especially unlicensed Japanese reproductions) are worth considerably less. Kewpies that were hand-signed by Rose O'Neill (most often etched on their arms or feet) are much rarer than non-signed Kewpies.

The Kewpie doll is the mascot of Kewpee Hamburgers, a chain of fast-food restaurants originally founded in 1923 in Flint, Michigan, by Samuel V. Blair under the name Kewpee Hotel Hamburgs. Since 1914, it has also been the mascot of Hickman High School in Columbia, Missouri.

