

“A crude white porcelain figure”

From Sandhills to Sandpoint

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Figure1: Crude white porcelain figures of naked children. Author’s collection.

Amongst the eclectic and eccentric collection of miniature “specimens” on display in my study stand two tiny naked female babies. Made from glazed, unpainted bisque porcelain, with minimally-sculpted features, and less than five centimetres tall, one has, like the Venus de Milo, lost most of her arms, while the other is complete (Figure 1). They were found in an antique store in Hebden Bridge, Yorkshire. They are, in the words of archaeologist Eleanor Casella, “crude white porcelain figures.”

Casella found a “crude white porcelain figure” on the site of Hagg Cottages in Sandhills, Alderley Edge, Cheshire: it is a naked child, its limbs immovable, its extremities broken off. It would have been about 5cm tall when complete (Casella 2004) (Figure 2). A tiny crude white porcelain figure of a naked child less than 2cm tall, its limbs immovable, was found on the Thames foreshore in June 2016 by a “mudlark” (Figure 3). A metal detectorist, exploring the site of the 1863 battle of Champion Hill, found the remains of a carpetbag filled with unused ammunition and a crude white porcelain figure of a naked child (Bearss 2005). When the wreck of the steamship *Arabia* was excavated in 1988 a carpenter’s chest was discovered in the hold. Inside the chest, wrapped in a sock, was a crude white porcelain figure of a naked child (*Arabia* Steamboat Museum 2011). Renovations at the Randell Cottage, in Christchurch, New Zealand, revealed a crude white porcelain figure of a naked child hidden in a wall (Museum of New

Zealand 2009) (Figure 4). In “Little Lon” Casselden Place, Melbourne, Australia, a notorious “slum,” archaeological excavations uncovered a crude white porcelain figure of a naked child (Smith and Hayes 2010). Recent archaeological investigations of Willa Herman’s Bordello, in Sandpoint, Idaho, produced two crude white porcelain figures of naked children (Swords 2012) (Figure 5).

These tiny, usually naked, figures are a mystery to which people have offered solutions, but each solution is different and anecdotal. Archaeologists regularly unearth them in every “westernised” country¹, and equally regularly identify them as children’s playthings. They are probably not playthings. By definition they are stiff, unmoving, hard, shiny, uninteresting, easily swallowed, easily broken (many of the excavated examples have lost their forearms, which jut out at right angles to their bodies).



Figure 2: crude white porcelain figure of naked child found Hagg's Cottage, Cheshire (Casella 2004)



Figure 3: Crude white porcelain figure of naked child found on the Thames foreshore



Figure 4: Crude white porcelain figure of naked child found hidden in a wall of Randell's Cottage, Christchurch, New Zealand (Anon nd).



Figure 5: Crude white porcelain figure of naked children found at Willa Herman's bordello, Sandpoint, Idaho (Swords 2012).

Until recently these unremarkable objects were nameless, hence Casella’s description. Because of their immobility, in the US they have acquired the name “Frozen Charlotte,” adopting the title of an early nineteenth century song *Young Charlotte*². They have also called been called “Penny Dolls,” though I think that a penny is too high a price to pay for this crude lump of bisque porcelain, and there were plenty of jointed “Penny Dolls.” Sometimes called “Pillar Dolls” or “Pudding Dolls,” in Germany they were called *Badepuppen* (“Bathing Babies”) and *Nacktfrosch* (“Naked Babies”).³ Researching these two latter titles is problematic for sadly obvious reasons, as is another common identification “China Babies.”

¹ They appear to transcend, at least slightly, cultural boundaries. An example was found in Market Street Chinatown, San Jose, California (Engmann 2007, 16) and two in a present-day antiques market in Ahmedabad, India (Lokesh Ghai 2016, pers comm).

² Written in 1843 by Seba Smith (see Lord 1966 and Higgins 2002). The song was also sometimes entitled *A Corpse Going to a Ball*. For a discussion of the recent origin of this identification, see Taylor-Blake 2019.

³ “Bathing Babies” were only glazed on one side, so that they would float in water. They appear to be considerably larger than “Frozen Charlottes.”

These figurines range in size from smaller than 10 mm up to 10cm (some similar but much larger figures are up to 50cm tall). They are almost all naked, and sometimes ambiguously-gendered. More obviously male figurines are sometimes referred to as “Charlies.” Many others are definitely female.

A minority of the figures have painted eyes and hair, others, especially those from Germany, have a moulded bonnet, while a few are moulded and sometimes painted, as fully dressed. They seem to have been manufactured between 1820 and 1914, in Germany and England, though they may have been made in other countries. Those survivors that are sold by the dozen on *eBay* and *etsy* web sites are mostly seconds and wasters from a waste dump on a German pottery site. But those found in archaeological contexts present a puzzling picture. None of the following suggestions as to what function these diminutive creatures performed have been backed by solid evidence.

Pen wiper:

The figure would have had a multi-layered skirt, on which people using dip pens would wipe excess ink (Figure 6). The anonymous maker of the example from *Godey's Lady's Book* used “a black china baby about three inches tall.”⁴



Figure 6: *The Miss Dinah Pen-wiper*. Anon, *Godey's Ladies Book*, May 1861, p 451.

Tea cooler:

In polite society, blowing on one's tea to cool it would be frowned on, so the small figure would be dropped into the cup to absorb some of the heat.

Teapot crack preventer:

A figure would be dropped into the teapot before adding water, the theory being that the heat absorbed by the figurine would avoid the teapot cracking.

Dress form:

The figure would be used as a basic form on which to sew dolls' clothes. Given the diminutive size of many of these figures, this is unlikely.

Plaything:

The common identification of these objects as children's playthings is arguable. The figures were often small enough to be easily swallowed, and since their limbs couldn't be moved, they would be difficult

⁴ For the racial and abuse implications of this seemingly innocent object see Bernstein 2011, 206.

to dress and pose in meaningful positions, and would thus be very uninteresting playthings. There were many other “penny dolls” available that had moveable limbs. An exception could be the larger “Bathing Baby” type, which was intended to be float on water. Their discovery in adult locations – for example taverns, a brothel, a carpenter’s chest, the collection of an elderly lady and San Francisco harbour – also makes this connection doubtful.

Pudding doll:

It is suggested that the figures were placed in a pudding or cake mix before cooking, and that finding the object when eating the dish would result in good luck or fertility. It would also likely break a tooth.

Cake decoration:

It is unlikely that these figures were used as cake-top decorations. A parallel group of tiny figures specifically manufactured for this purpose can be identified. It includes a variety of animals and other designs more appropriate for ceremonial occasions (Figure).



Figure 7: “Miss Muffet” cake decorations. Photograph Andrew Mills. Height approx. 3cm.

Sewing needle lubrication

Beeswax was often used to lubricate sewing needles, especially when sewing stiff or thick materials. Tiny figurines were dipped repeatedly into molten beeswax, and once this had hardened it could be used to coat needles (Figure). This might explain the presence of the “Frozen Charlotte” in the carpenter’s chest found of the *Arabia*.



Figure 8: Figurines used as beeswax holders.

Memento mori:


There appears to be an association of “Frozen Charlotte” type figures and miniature coffins. In recent times this seems to be more creative than sinister, and is probably connected with the “Goth” movement. In the early twentieth century, tiny figures in coffins may have represented a ghoulish sense of humour ( Figure).



Figure 9: Miniature “gag” coffins, presumably given to chatterboxes.

In the nineteenth century, with its high death rate amongst very young children, tiny figurines may have memorialised infant deaths. Although postmortem photographs are well known, there is little evidence of the memorialisation of dead children in other ways

Matrimonial prospects:

A possible clue to the roles of these figures might be found in a small number of carved wooden bottles. On the exterior is a short sentence that reads “Matrimonial Prospects at [a place name]” I have come across bottles from San Francisco, Ashbury Park (New Jersey) and “Soo Boston”.





Figure 10: Matrimonial Prospects (wooden) bottles with figurines

The bottle is corked, and when the cork is withdrawn, attached to it is a string, hanging from which are two or more tiny ceramic (and sometimes base metal) figures, often with at least one figure being black (Figure 10). Other examples feature two figures hanging from the cork of a small stoneware jug and four black figures issuing from a tiny wooden phial. A St Louis World's Fair bottle can be dated to 1904. In an article on "gag boxes" Mardi Timm, a collector of "novelties," mentions "little wooden pill bottles, with a cork or some kind of stopper in the top. One of these older ones from the early 1900s says 'Matrimonial Prospects, Handle With Care' on the outside. And when you pull the cork out, there's a string attached to it and on it are little metal women, who are naked. It's a strange, sexist thing" (Hix 2012).

The exact meaning of these "Matrimonial Prospects" objects is not clear. All examples found so far originate in the US. It is not clear whether they were suggesting a series of spouses or a series of offspring. The figures were often female. Some were all black; others included both black and white figures. They may have suggested that one had poor prospects of matrimony, represented by a string of crude dolls, or they might be making a racist comment.

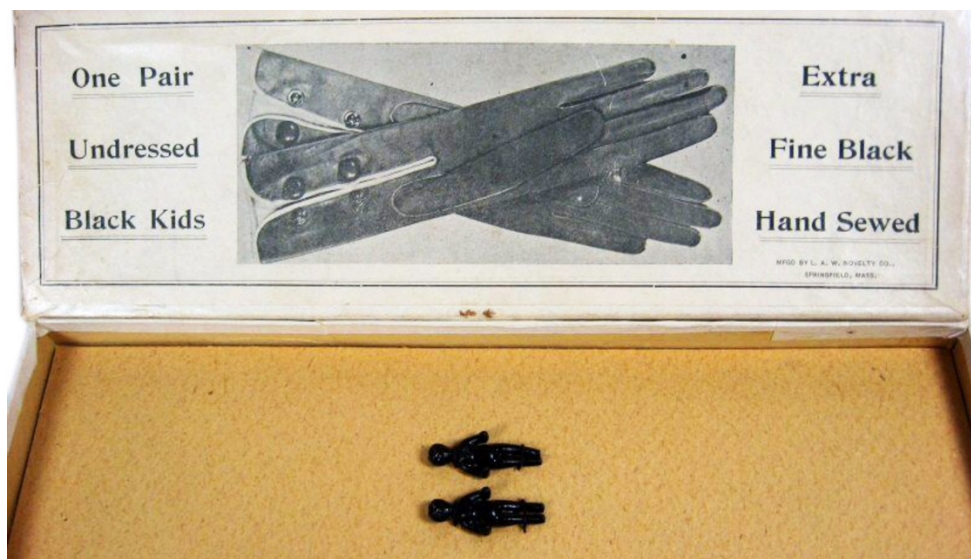


Figure 11: "Gag" box with "black kids."

Robin Bernstein quotes a writer remembering the mid nineteenth century when “very small dolls of black china were supposed to be the proper thing for servants in dolls houses” (Bernstein 2011, 205). Whether the “very small dolls” were of the Frozen Charlotte type isn’t clear, but apart from the designation of black doll = servant, it implies that the very small dolls had white equivalents.

Charms:

The widespread finds of these small figurines (on all continents), and the adult nature of many of their locations (harbours, brothels, taverns, prisons, ranches, a battlefield etc.), suggests that they may have been carried as good luck charms.⁵ The equally frequent occurrence of ceramic dolls’ limbs indicates that these may have served the same function (they are available today, made into pendants on the etsy web site).

I am fascinated by these objects. That they might possess some deeper meaning is suggested by their similarity with much older artefacts. The German figures bear a striking resemblance to medieval “Kruselerpuppen,” small pipeclay or earthenware figurines wearing an elaborate Kruseler cap (Figure 12). The functions of these figures are uncertain but it has been suggested that they were associated with christenings, weddings, votive offerings or pilgrimage (Schmudlach 2008). Even more ancient parallels can be found amongst prehistoric figurines. For example, a 20,000-year-old figurine discovered in Mal’ta, in Siberia (Hitchcock 2016), could easily be mistaken for a Frozen Charlotte at first sight (Figure 13).



Figure 12: Kruseler Puppchen, 14th/15th century. Germany. (Schmudlach 2008).

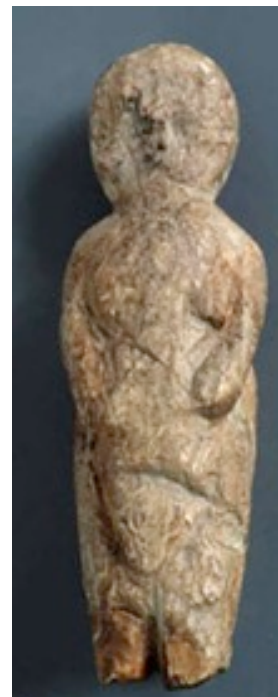


Figure 13: Mal'ta figurine, Palaeolithic, Siberia. (Hitchcock 2016).

These tiny, crude miniature ceramic figures tell a more complex and mysterious story than their popular interpretations suggest. They demonstrate a possible link with artefacts from the very distant past, whose functions we can only guess at and argue over, and with medieval objects whose uses are again unclear. This stresses that archaeology, even of a period as recent as 150 years ago, can present interpretive challenges and risk knee-jerk responses. At the end of my discussion I am no nearer a

⁵ e.g. For example, during the 1994 Mini Metro excavations in San Francisco, 34 fragmentary Frozen Charlottes were found (Anon 2002). Frozen Charlottes were found in Willa Herma's Bordello, Sandpoint Idaho (Swords 2012), Oatlands Gaol (Fidge 2013) and Los Penasquitos Ranch House (Mirsky 1993, 179).

definitive explanation of a “crude white porcelain figure,” but am even more fascinated by its possibilities.

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