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Barbie® as Grecian Goddess" and Egyptian Queen": Ancient Women's History by Mattel®

Between 1993 and 1997 the American toy company Mattel produced 'the Great Eras Collection', a series of collectable Barbie dolls dressed to represent historical moments ranging from fifth century Greece through 1920's America. There are ten dolls in all, beginning with Gibson Girl Barbie but also encompassing two ancient Mediterranean figures: Egyptian Queen Barbie and Grecian Goddess Barbie. Although Barbie is famous for her professional, as well as sartorial, versatility – since her invention in 1959, she has been everything from a fashion model to an astronaut – the Great Eras Collection is the first time that the world's most famous doll has transcended time, creating a supposedly factual history of women embodied in the fictional figure of Barbie. In this sense, the dolls of the Great Eras Collection make a point similar to that of the eternally-proliferating 'professional' dolls: just as the latter make Barbie the representative of everything women might be in the present, the former use her to embody everything that they have been in the past. Yet the Great Eras Collection also displays the tension between diversity and sameness which is present in the more traditional images of Barbie, as the same doll with the same features, same body, and same skin tone is made to represent vastly different cultures and moments in time. Underneath the clothing and makeup which are, for Mattel, the 'stuff' of history, Egyptian Queen and Grecian Goddess are the same doll; Barbie is not only omnipresent but eternal. Despite the fact that the dolls are explicitly marketed to an adult audience, moreover, the Collection represents itself as an educational tool: the dolls come in boxes designed to look like leather-bound books, whose 'spines' give the name and 'volume' number of the enclosed Barbie; the back of the package exclaims 'there's so much to see and learn as you collect these very special editions [of Barbie]!'. The Great Eras Collection thus not only explicitly draws on history to sell its product, but also on its product to sell history. In this paper, therefore, I discuss how and why ancient Greece and Egypt are joined together with the figure of Barbie in the Great Eras Collection, and what, ultimately, this joining says about the consumption of ancient women's history in modern western society.