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Dressing Up: Religion and Ethnicity in Israeli National Dolls

MAYA BALAKIRSKY KATZ*

Abstract

This article considers Israel's national image both at home and abroad through the framework of Israeli costume dolls, looking specifically at the way that gender played a role in Israel's national image as it travelled from domestic production to international reception. Initially, predominantly female doll makers produced three main types of Israeli dolls, but over time the religious Eastern European male doll triumphed in the pantheon of national types. Produced for retail sale to non-Hebrew speaking tourists by immigrant woman, the Eastern European religious male doll came to represent Israel abroad while the market pushed representations of the Middle Eastern Jewish woman and the native sabra child to the side-lines. This article examines the shift from the multi-ethnic collection of dolls as representative of the nation's idea of itself to the privileging of the male Eastern European doll as representative of the normative image of Israel abroad.

Keywords

Dolls; Israeli visual culture; Rivka Stark-Avivi; sabra; Maskit; Disney.

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Displaying Dolls

Through retrospective archival projects and significant museum exhibitions, Israel has shown a sustained interest in her national image (Donner 2001; Furstenberg 1999; Tartakover 1999; Zalmona and Manor 1998). One of the popular objects featured in many of the retrospective exhibitions devoted to Israel's national image are the handmade costume dolls initially produced in the Yishuv (Jewish communities in Palestine) during the British Mandate period (1920–1948) and in what coalesced into a large and profitable industry in the two decades following the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 (Shenhav-Keller and Grossman 2011). Although the dolls varied in style and materials from one artist to the next, they were predominantly made, marketed and sold by women, stood at under 10 inches, and represented social 'types' whose occupations, ethnicity, religious and political positions were communicated through costume.

Since a vast number of the self-referential museological projects are scheduled in conjunction with Israel's Independence Days and funded by the state, Israel's costume dolls are primarily exhibited as a slice of life of a multicultural Yishuv (Farkash 2008). In focusing on the birth of the nation, Israel's museums inadvertently present the exhibition of dolls as documentary objects of a bygone reality, almost as if the dolls were the mummified men and women who settled the land in anticipation of political autonomy. What is often neglected in exhibitions focused on the *formation* of the nation is the ways that the dolls also grant historians access into the *evolution* of Israel's national image both at home and abroad (e.g., Farkash 2008). In his seminal work on the role of the viewer/reader in the formation of the text, literary critic Wolfgang Iser places the viewer/reader as an active creator in the production of textual meaning, an approach that has opened up myriad new vistas into traditional iconographic studies and signification analyses (1978: 65). Tracing the multiple meanings and uses of the dolls through the various stages of creation, production, industrialisation, and consumption sheds light on the ways that a nation's self-image evolves in circulation. Following Iser's theorisation into the temporal dynamics of the aesthetic experience, the study of Israeli costume dolls must thus be informed by the notion that there is no 'original' or 'true' meaning attached to the dolls but only an unstable constellation of meanings predicated on ever-evolving interactions with the dolls themselves and layers of interpretations that these interactions produce. We might thus treat dolls as palimpsests that necessarily evolve during their export from the Middle East to the West and as a result of their change of status from handcraft to tourist souvenirs to museum objects that operate within the context of national celebration.

To some extent, the sort of reception history that Iser and his colleagues developed allows us to work backwards and identify the types of dolls that eventually acquired cultural authority and those that fell away to market trends despite the intentions of the artists who made them. From this perspective, one of the most fascinating elements of the travelogue of women-made Israeli dolls is the ultimate triumph of the Eastern European religious male doll as the most representative 'type' of Israeli national doll as exemplified by Disney's choice of dolls and gendered display for its Israel section in 'It's a Small World' flume ride (Burke 2001; Elkins 2003; Mirzoeff 1999; Mitchell 1995). Handmade

costume dolls are a particularly useful vehicle for the study of how normative national identity develops because the Eastern European male doll emerged as a national symbol through an industry committed to expressing an authentic Middle Eastern image and in expanding the boundaries of women's work. It is in the liminal stages of the doll industry that I seek to understand the role that gender plays in the formation and evolution of the normative Israeli image both in Israel and abroad.

Making Dolls

In Iser's reception model, understanding the working conditions of production and artist intentionality are useful in so much as they are a stage of development – rather than the foundations – of meaning. Before an object/text can pass into the interpretive terrain of reception, the artist imbues the object with her own historical consciousness, sense of social norms and aesthetic conventions (what Iser calls 'repertoire').

In retracing the production stage of the doll market, it is important to separate the market-based association of Israeli doll-making with village craft from the actual backgrounds of the first doll makers. While some doll makers such as German émigré doll-maker Edith Samuel (1907–1964) worked in agricultural communes known as *kibbutzim*, this peasant-craft characterisation does not capture the sensibilities of Samuel and the majority of women who shaped the field at the outset. The country's first doll-makers generally hailed from large urban centres in Central and Eastern Europe and were typically well-to-do, educated artists trained in fine-arts institutions in their countries of origin.¹ In the first wave of Yishuv doll-making, doll-makers consciously designed their dolls as 'soft sculptures' for wealthy consumers who could afford handmade objects and whose value resided more in domestic display than in child's play (Shenhav-Keller 1995: 156–157).² While European refugees to Palestine sought to create a local Middle Eastern style rooted in the land, they did not inspire comparison to Arab labourers, but rather to European designers, dressmakers and knitters (Hoffman 1940: 7). At the outset of the doll-making enterprise in the 1920s and 1930s, critics described the products of the consignment shops that sold the first handmade dolls as 'lovely things', enthusiastically observing that the dolls 'are at one and the same time charming toys and portraits, and actually much prettier than the famous though rather artificial Italian Lenci-dolls' (Hoffman 1940: 7). The same critic singled out the doll dresses crafted by German Jewish poet émigré Else Lasker-Schüler (1869–1945) for their dainty elegance, commenting that they 'look as if they had come from the Grand Opera House of Lilliput' (7). With similar admiration, Italian tourist Alessandro Tedeschi described the handmade dolls of the Vilna-educated Polish émigré Rivka Stark-Avivi (1895–1979) as 'sculptures' in the fine-arts tradition (Tedeschi 1931: 51). In her own article penned specifically for a domestic readership in

¹ For more information on individual doll-makers, see Gordon 1982; Pickering 1982; Izen 2000; Lerner 1990; Rubin 1989; Bischoff 1995; Hathaway 1984.

² As late as the mid-1980s, the dolls remained a privileged luxury item for Jewish tourists and a minority of Israelis.

1945, Stark-Avivi maintained the artistic status of her work by proposing that the country should acquire these 'decorative types' for its museums and educational institutions (8).

My emphasis on the academic and middle-class roots of Yishuv doll-makers is partially an attempt to correct the binary between art and craft that persists around women's handicrafts, but primarily to demonstrate that doll-makers fashioned themselves and their work within the core political climate of the Yishuv's artistic culture. Unlike conventional accounts of women artists that seek to expand our understandings of alternative spaces, the very nature of the costume doll was European in origin and must be understood as participating in the imperial and patriarchal character of European nation-building. When Bezalel Museum Director Mordecai Narkiss described Stark-Avivi's soft cotton, wool, and silk dolls as 'works of miniature sculpture' and noted that they constituted a 'remarkable contribution' to the country's art, he framed both the dolls and the doll-maker as participating in the crystallisation of the very concept of Jewish statehood (*mamlachtiut*) (1930: 2). The note of support from the director of the country's premier Jewish art institution was a particular boon for Stark-Avivi because Yishuv doll-makers consciously imbued their dolls with an orientalism that was firmly aligned with the aesthetic program of the predominantly male Bezalel School of Arts and Crafts (Manor 2005).

As a general trend, the first handmade costume dolls did not represent babies or children but ranged in age and gender across various professional 'types' such as farmers, paperboys and fruit salesmen. This choice of subjects aligned with the educational philosophies of the *kibbutzim* in the 1930s and 1940s that embraced communal upbringing over the traditional family structure. At the same time, the occupational dolls could also be defined by their significance for the different ideological claims to the land. While some doll-makers ventured into Arab character dolls, such as native-born artist Ruth Sarfati-Sternschuss (1928–2010) who carved female Arab and Bedouin dolls from local wood and accessorised her dolls in colourful *jalabiyas* (traditional Egyptian garments), the vast majority of dolls were identifiably Jewish and could be divided by their enactment of their perceived Israeliness. The three most popular ideological categories of dolls could be divided into the three dominant approaches to 'Israeliness' at the time: the religious Eastern European (*haredi*) doll represents religion; the ethnic Middle Eastern (*Mizrahi*) doll represents ethnicity/nationalism; and the secular native (*sabra*) doll represents culture. For example, a student could simultaneously be identifiable as *haredi*, an orange vender as *Mizrahi* and a paperboy as a *sabra*. If Yishuv doll-makers avoided focusing on dolls that enacted domestic roles, the dolls could nonetheless be divided by gender categories. With notable exceptions, doll-makers generally represented the religious Eastern European doll as male, the Jewish Middle Eastern doll as female, and the native *sabra* doll as a male child or adolescent.

What is critical to the analysis of the individual professional dolls, the three most frequently used 'ideological' types, and the conventional gendered constructions, is that doll-makers did not promote any one type of doll over another. No one doll represented the Yishuv, but rather the intersubjectivity between the ethnic, religious, cultural and social doll types enacted the vision of a Jewish collective. Only as participants in a dynamic and multicultural *group* did the dolls communicate a system of national values and practices, partially through

the Zionist contextualisation of the biblical prophecy of the 'ingathering of the exiles' from the diaspora to the Promised Land. After 1948, the marked differences between the various doll 'types' enacted the Law of Return, which historian Arye Edrei calls the 'most fundamental law of the State' that sought to guarantee the 'ingathering of the exiles' (2015: 109). The early doll-makers were intentionally seeking to expand the image of the potential native population and to consciously create a variety of social 'types' with recourse to 'ethnic' wardrobes from the nations of the world.

Far from home and family, the Jewish immigrant women who became the country's first doll-makers created dolls that performed a heroic historical past by playing the part of imaginary 'ancestors' and helped to envision a utopian future by 'dressing up' for the occasion as citizens of a Jewish state. Doll-maker Edith Samuel, for example, clothed her dolls in handmade local textiles in desert colours of beige and brown and sea colours of blue and yellow, incorporating local 'ethnic' fashions such as the *keffiyeh*, 'a patterned fabric scarf of Arabic origin, which was adopted as the hallmark of the new Israeli youth seeking to assimilate in the land' (Shenhav-Keller and Grossman 2011: n.p.). Samuel literally assembled her dolls from the land by using local soil to stuff papier-mâché bodies created from Hebrew newspapers and a composite of sawdust and pulp wrapped over chicken mesh for her dolls' faces and limbs. The indigenous materials for all the component doll parts tied the ethnic characters of the world directly to the land.

In the 1920s, for example, the Polish émigré Rivka Stark-Avivi created a series of twenty ethnographic dolls representing different 'types' of Jews that she claimed to have met after her emigration to Palestine. One traveller returning to Italy from a visit to the Yishuv in 1931 celebrated the dolls of Rivka Stark-Avivi as 'a kind of present day Palestine' with its diverse representation of 'Russian Jews, Moroccan Jews, Yemenites, Bedouins, Arabs, old, young, poor, rich, faithful mystics, a new generation of young rebels, conservatives and liberals, fatalists and active workers, oriental beauties with slanted eyes, the color of chocolate, and blond Slavs' (Tedeschi 1931: 51) (Figure 1).

As Stark-Avivi maintained, each doll was a work of art, but together they represented a reality larger than the sum of its parts: 'Palestine contains so rich



Figure 1: Rivka Stark-Avivi and her Dolls, 1930. Reproduced from Alessandro Tedeschi in *La Rassegna Mensile di Israel*, 1931.



Figure 2: Rivka Stark-Avivi and her Dolls, 1930. Reproduced from Alessandro Tedeschi in *La Rassegna Mensile di Israel*, 1931.

a variety of types... The Jewish settlers from various countries provide a collection of types with special appeal to the artist, and lend themselves to study from the artistic, ethnographic, historical and educational points of view' (1945: 8). Another critic said something similar of the Samuel's dolls, which act 'as reminders of the diverse types of Jews coming to Israel from all over the world' (Tammuz and Wykes-Joyce 1963: 298). In a telling portrait published in 1931, Stark-Avivi embraces her group of ethnic dolls, uniting her creations into a united family in a 'motherly' embrace (Figure 2).

The representations of gender in the dolls also contributed to the image of a self-sustaining society of productive workers. At the very least, the balanced inclusion of men, women and children emphasised the sustainability of the Yishuv and the very presence of women workers indirectly positioned them as both mothers and wives in the nation-building project. The *sabra* child is perhaps the most quintessentially Israeli type in that this type was consciously inspired by the image of the agricultural Jewish pioneer in Eastern European youth movements and adapted for his native status with costume details such as simple desert sandals, a sun hat (*kova tembel*), and an embroidered blue-and-white shirt typical of the *kibbutzim* (Almog 2000; Katz 2013). The representation of the *sabra* figure as a child also makes intrinsic sense since the motif refers to the generation born on native Jewish soil as popularised by Hungarian émigré cartoonist Kariel Gardosh in his child-character 'Srulik', or 'Little Israel' for the newspaper *Ma'ariv* in the early 1950s (Dosh 1957, 1960; Katz 2013).

The trend to represent the *Mizrahi* subject as female and the *haredi* subject as male is less self-evident and requires further investigation. Like the Bezalel painters of the 1920s, such as Raban, Reuven Rubin and Nahum Guttman, Yishuv doll-makers, such as Edith Samuel, Orientalised the *Mizrahi* subject as a way to express a Jewish culture rooted in the Mediterranean landscape while at the same time showcasing their artistic status through their disciplined handling of the ethnic subject. Like their Bezalel counterparts, doll-makers diligently

maintained the European taste for highly detailed handicraft such as miniature facial painting, costume embroidery and ornamental filigree in their representation of the ethnic subject.

While doll-makers relied on stylistic conventions for the rendering of ethnic subjects, historian Yael Guilat has called attention to how the Yemenite female subject also functioned as 'an agent of change and a herald of national revival' (2006: 199). Middle Eastern dolls remained tied to the contemporary world in their performance of daily activities such as eating or working, which can be seen in Stark-Avivi's Arab dolls and Ruth Tauber's Yemenite dolls selling newspapers, packing crates of oranges for export and enjoying a mid-afternoon repast on a handwoven rug. In terms of appearance, the Middle Eastern dolls also seemed to embody a more corporeal state than their Eastern European counterparts. For example, the male *Mizrahi* dolls generally boasted a wide berth, a formidable paunch and layers of distinctive colorful robes, scarves and sashes, while the female dolls, such as that of a female watermelon carrier, were often bestowed with exaggerated breasts, extraordinary heft and layers of colorful skirts that further broadened the base on which they stood. Middle Eastern dolls were often part of a larger tableau. Doll-makers, such as Fanny Peltz and Ruth Tauber, who found inspiration specifically in the Jewish-Yemenite subject, created not only single dolls but entire family units. Whether it was a man smoking a water pipe and listening to the gramophone, or a woman sitting at a handicraft project, transporting wares in baskets and water jugs, or selling her goods at a vendor stand, the Middle Eastern subject seemed to manifest the present in its mundane and practical details.

By comparison to the concretisation of the Middle Eastern doll in the present and in a literal place, the Eastern European doll type, such as those made by Stark-Avivi and Samuel, was often represented by a religious man whose timelessness was evoked not only through his old-fashioned religious garb but exoticised character (Figure 3). In one of her religious Eastern European dolls from the 1920s, Stark-Avivi dresses a slender figure in a long cloth coat reminiscent



Figure 3: Rivka Stark-Avivi, Doll, 1930. Reproduced from Alessandro Tedeschi in *La Rassegna Mensile di Israel*, 1931.



Figure 4: Rivka Stark-Avivi, Doll, 1930. Reproduced from Alessandro Tedeschi in *La Rassegna Mensile di Israel*, 1931.

of the Hasidic *kapote* and a fur hat associated with the Hasidic *shtreiml* but without defining details that would make the doll recognisable as a member of an identifiable Hasidic sect (Helman 2011). Like other doll-makers of the period, Stark-Avivi also imbued her religious male dolls with the soft features and slim figure of a more androgynous character than his *Mizrahi* counterparts. Rather, Stark-Avivi designs the religious male subject as a sinuous dancer stroking his stylised beard and closing his eyes in a meditative pose as his robe falls coily open to reveal a shapely dancer's leg (Figure 4).

The Eastern European doll was also more often framed as a solitary figure lost in otherworldly prayer while leaning precariously on a book podium (*shtender*) or holding a ceremonial object such as a Torah or a Kiddush cup in one hand, supported by a wooden pole (Figure 5). In contrast to the Middle Eastern type whose productivity is enmeshed in the day-to-day tasks of life and work, the religious doll conveyed a more universal sense of spirituality that was un tethered from any kind of real space or local presence. While the Middle Eastern character dolls wore unique pieces of jewellery and embroidery, doll-makers applied a more minimalist style to the painted faces and wardrobe items of



Figure 5: Haredi dolls, c. 1960s. Photograph by author, 2015.

their Eastern European dolls. Stark-Avivi's Hasidic dancer, for example, is a solitary, but hardly independent, figure. Like other examples of the early religious male doll type that need to have their felt feet nailed into a wooden stand, Stark-Avivi's Hasid can barely stand and requires extraneous supports, suggesting that he cannot represent the Jewish nation-state on his own. Edith Samuel's delicate and gender-ambiguous religious rag dolls are likewise frail, delicate and androgynous. The daughter of a German rabbi who following her older sister to Palestine to escape the Nazis several years before the rest of her family was murdered at the Theresienstadt concentration camp, Samuel marked her religious subjects as conveyers of an irretrievable past (Samuel and Genger 1987). She wrapped her religious dolls in wardrobes that easily identify them as tender adolescent boys but left their faces unpainted and gave them only the prop of ancient books.

While Middle Eastern dolls evoked a presence within a real landscape and time, the Eastern European male doll functioned as metaphor, perpetually signifying and alluding to something outside its immediate indexical subject.³ The early doll-makers conceived of each of these three types as part of the broader collection of Jewish citizens that could enact Israeli identity through their belonging to the group. It is the exceptionalism of the religious male doll – his exotic, frail and otherworldly religiosity – that makes this type of doll included in, rather than representative of, the normative Israeli national image. The abstraction of the religious subject from the physical world requires other Israeli dolls, the women and children of the here and now, to 'place' him if not concretely on the land then within the meta-spectacle of the Zionist ingathering of exiles. While ethnic and *sabra* dolls embodied the physicality of the land on which they stood, the religious male doll operated only in relationship to the philosophical idea of the *polis*. The religious male doll does not exercise any authority over the others, not even in the terrain of the *halakhic* tradition

³ For a theoretical discussion on 'presentness' and 'metaphor', see the seminal essay by Fried 1998 [1967].

(Jewish legal principles), but rather exists by his right to 'Return' based on the principles of secular nationalism.

While it would be difficult to explain how the Eastern European religious doll exercised so much staying power with consumers, what is abundantly clear is that doll consumers were likely to purchase a single doll. The dolls were packaged individually and sold as individual souvenirs to gift to wives and daughters (Figure 6). The act of choosing one of the three ideological types involved an act of personal identification with the Jewish national project along the default lines of the contemporaneous debates on the national identity of Israel. Whatever the intentions of the artist, when the consumer chooses one doll at the exclusion of others, he imbues it with new significance as representative of the whole. The resale market of Israeli dolls demonstrates that the *sabra* doll type was the most common type sold in the 1930s to 1950s. So popular was this nation-child by the end of the 1950s that German émigré Friedel Stern (1917–2006) satirised his cultural hold with a caricature depicting a diverse sampling of Israeli 'types' diving into the wide end of a funnel in a Seussical machine that homogenises men and women from diverse ethnic backgrounds to produce the single version of a stereotypical *sabra*. By the late 1960s and 1970s, however, the religious male type was by far the most popular type of Israel national costume doll and would be, for example, the choice for Disney's Israel section in



Figure 6: Israeldoll, c. late 1960s. In the private collection of Tova Friedman. Photograph taken by Jeanette Rodriquez, 2015.

'It's a Small World' ride in Orlando, Florida in the early 1970s and its subsequent parks. The story of the primacy of one doll over another, within the paradigm shift of the replacement of the preference for the *sabra* child doll with that of the *haredi* male doll, reveals much about both the evolution of the industry and Israel's national image.

Industrialising Dolls

Individual doll-makers made a name for themselves in the 1920s to 1940s, but two enterprises sought to industrialise doll-making along the way: the Palestinian branch of Women's International Zionist Organisation (WIZO) and the socially minded workshop Maskit (Shenhav-Keller 2006). Both organisations would radically transform doll-making into a craft industry and into a women's labour sector that moved away from the Bezalel cultural sphere of influence. WIZO came into the doll-making scene first as part of its aid programs aimed at indigent mothers and children. Embarking on the 'village crafts' industry with its Shani workshops in 1929 and its WIZO brand in the 1930s, WIZO absorbed young immigrant women through handiwork by providing short and targeted training, loan programs, sewing machines and irons, wool and spinning wheels, hand weaving looms and embroidery frames, and arranging short-term vocational positions and apprenticeships (Stein 1948).

By the 1950s, handmade costume dolls were among the most sought-after souvenir items in Israel, making room for another large-scale producer. When her husband, Israeli Defence Forces Chief of Staff Moshe Dayan, was named interim governor of Jerusalem in 1954, Ruth Dayan founded the fashion house Maskit to help absorb recent immigrants into the country's economy. Ruth Dayan convinced the Ministry of Labour to sponsor the enterprise as part of the campaign for the production and consumption of 'Domestic Products' (*Tozeret ha-Arez*). Maskit grew to 600 employees by 1956, at first mostly with immigrants from Russia, Poland and Hungary, but by the 1960s, with immigrants from North Africa, Yemen, and Iran. After the Six Day War, Ruth Dayan turned Maskit to the task of Arab-Israeli cooperation by having Jewish and Arab artisans work together at the company ('Gover hitzo shel motzri Maskit' 1957: 2).

WIZO and Maskit were not seeking to revolutionise the pantheon of national costume dolls but to create a self-sustaining social service on behalf of the country's destitute women. Commentators saw this industrialisation as a progressive movement that liberated women from the drudgery of unpaid domestic work and armed them with technical and marketable skills. Even the established Stark-Avivi celebrated the movement to industrialise doll-making, writing in 1945 that a face-lift to the art of doll-making promised liberation for the women who turned to the task: 'We no longer live in the romantic days of work at the loom during long wintry nights. Doll-making is not playing at dolls; it can no longer remain the domain of the exhausted housewife. The task demands organisation, system, concentration. Everything must be planned, part by part' (Avivi-Stark 1945: 8). By 1948, journalist Nadia Stein reported on the substantial progress in the organisation of the industry: 'They had to study the market, train the producers to work with professional finish, experiment with new crafts and new technical methods. The women who did the producing could not do

the marketing, nor were they even able in most cases to supply the technical equipment' (1948: n.p.).

Creating jobs came with the concomitant task of creating a mass-market consumer base. WIZO and Maskit marketed and sold the dolls primarily to tourists and in Jewish communities abroad. Doll-makers consigned their dolls to third-party distributors or sold them directly to souvenir shops or more professionalised shops owned by WIZO, Maskit and other aid societies (Dayan 2003; Dayan and Feinberg 1974). WIZO and Maskit operated dozens of local branches, social clubs, art studios and showrooms throughout the country and abroad.⁴ Ruth Tauber's dolls were among the first to be sold at ZIM, the first tax-free shop at the Ben Gurion airport. Women in America, Canada and England hosted WIZO and Maskit 'house parties' for the sale of 'Made in Israel' products throughout the 1950s and 1960s and a new consumer base of women were able to buy the dolls as mementos of a place to put on display in their diaspora homes rather than as part of a tourist experience ('Motzri Maskit' 1957: 4). The exceptional Israeli doll-maker, such as the renowned Ruth Sternhuss, was able to sell her dolls at Maskit's wholesale showroom on Fifty-Fifth Street in Manhattan (Goren 1970: 9).

The growing demand for handmade Israeli dolls within the tourist trade created more jobs, and smaller workshops such as Isradoll and Sabra Doll emerged in the 1960s to compete with WIZO and Maskit. The industry as a whole began to employ *Mizrahi* women, coinciding, or perhaps correlating, with a shift in the status of the dolls from handmade art objects to mass-marketed consumer souvenirs in the tourist trade (Manor 2010). Unlike the previous generation of Eastern European doll-makers trained in fine-arts institutions, the individual *Mizrahi* doll-makers remained anonymous while the marketing departments capitalised on the ethnic makeup of the collective labour force. When Maskit appeared in the non-Jewish press, such as in an Iowa newspaper geared towards Bible-Belt Christians, the enterprise was cast in terms of the exoticism of its workers rather than of the multicultural project behind the making of an exotic line of dolls: Maskit 'organized the weavers and metalworkers who immigrated from Persia, Iraq, Yemen, Tripoli and a dozen other Oriental lands who now till their fields in villages... near Nazareth', weaving undyed lambs-wool, 'which could have warmed shepherds in Galilee, centuries before the birth of Christ' ('Bible Days Reflected in Fashions' 1956: 9). Because 'authentic' craftswomen provided much of the exotic flair for the industry, the earlier ethnographic attention poured into the dolls grew less emphatic.

In due course, as art historian Yael Guilat has demonstrated in her study of the employment of Yemeni workers at the Shani workshops of the 1920s, *Mizrahi* women at WIZO and Maskit invariably became subsidiary to the European directors, marketing team, supervisors and managers (2001). As Yemeni, Ethiopian and Bedouin doll-makers entered the WIZO and Maskit workforce, there was no indication that their presence would revive the craft traditions of their native lands (Epstein 1987; Muchawsky-Schnapper 1983). As early as 1939, one critic complained that Yemenite workers had mastered the delicate technique of the European embroidery, 'but it is hardly a matter of rejoicing that they may forget

⁴ For announcements and reviews of exhibitions of Israeli dolls in conjunction with world dolls, see 'Bubot yisraelit' 1951: 4; 'Bubot kol ha-olam' 1961: n.p.

their ancient and bountiful craft in order to produce “souvenirs de Vienne” (M. 1940: 6).⁵

Mizrahi workers came to doll production during the period when the *sabra* character cornered the tourist market and their training was geared towards the production of *sabra* dolls. The first *sabra* figures were children [both boys and girls] in clothing typically worn in agricultural communities, but these soon extended across gender and age. After the 1967 War, whatever variations in the *sabra* figures survived were erased by the turn in the doll industry to the soldier figure. The creation of soldier dolls allowed immigrant women to participate in the nation’s effort to protect itself through militarisation and they dressed the previous child-subjects of the *sabra* ‘type’ in the fatigues of the men and women in the Israeli armed forces.

As the *sabra*-cum-soldier figure saturated the doll market in the late 1960s, *Mizrahi* women were directed to simultaneously create Eastern European religious male dolls for what turned out to be a growth market. Although the religious male doll remained recognisable from its Yishuv iteration, the creative impulse behind the *Mizrahi* production of Eastern European religious male dolls was wholly different in the 1950s to 1960s. The most significant deviation from the traditional doll types was due to the new production model of doll-making workshops. With growing consumer demand, the one-of-a-kind handmade process of artists such as Edith Samuel proved too expensive and Maskit trained its workers to simulate the handmade technique through the more efficient process of liquid ceramic poured into moulds and to make production more efficient through the division of labour (M. 1946: 8). Soon, Samuel’s dolls were being reproduced by dozens of Maskit employees, and even specialists would be hard pressed to recognise the difference between one doll-maker and another.

Another change came from an aesthetic principle Ruth Dayan called ‘exaggeration’, which involved the isolation of a single design element to suggest a more intricate style or pattern (1974: 339). The ‘exaggerated’ image of the religious Eastern European male meant that the doll was costumed in simple, solid black-and-white garb, a fairly non-descript choice in comparison to earlier examples of religious dolls that were clad in striped and colourful robes. The result was a religious male doll that was even more stereotypical and impersonal than the already abstracted type of the 1920s and 1930s. Relative to the wide assortment of colourful ethnographic costumes of the *Mizrahi* doll, the black-clothed religious Jew no longer conformed to the kaleidoscope of ethnic types of the Yishuv period nor to the localism of the contemporary production of Israeli dolls.⁶ In describing the Maskit approach to Israeli craft, Ruth Dayan stressed the use of local colour: ‘whether a *sabra* or from Yemen, North or South Africa, Holland, Germany, Russia, or any of the many other countries from which our people have come, the Israeli craftsman is influenced by the land. Craftsmen have borrowed colours from the cobalt sky, the fields of citron, olive, and date, the sands of the Negev, the sun-baked hills, and the gold of Jerusalem; they have taken the shapes of the Bedouin tent, the roaring sea, and the shallow hills. They have mixed these colors and shapes into a new creation, which

⁵ See also ‘WIZO Annual’ 1939: 2.

⁶ For an exhibition catalog that explores the ‘East’ in Israeli art, see Hirschfeld 1998; Hasson 1997.

is a reflection of Israel itself' (1974: 1). Rather than participating in the cumulative performance of the 'ingathering of the exiles' in the interwar period, Maskit's exaggeration principle resulted in the transformation of the religious male doll into an object that existed independently and functioned outside of the national collective.

Rather than reflect the way that contemporary religious Israeli men dressed, the *Mizrahi* doll-makers relegated the Eastern European religious types to 'a vanished world'. The *Mizrahi* women who made the *haredi* dolls did not harbour the same nostalgia for Eastern European Jewish life as their Eastern European predecessors and the dolls did not inhabit the romanticised other-worldliness of the 1920s creation of 'types'. Instead, the *Mizrahi*-made religious doll referenced the black-and-white photographs of pre-war Eastern European Jewry, which historian Steven Fine argues 'served to reinforce a melancholy ("lachrymose") view of Eastern European Jewish culture, and at the same time to push that world farther into the past than it actually is' (2012: 7). Eastern European religious male dolls carried metaphorical meaning from the start, initially alluding to the forward march of history into the Promised Land. When the metaphoric qualities were redoubled by the production shortcuts that industrialisation introduced to doll-making, the religious doll came to suggest something different: the end of Jewish life in Europe. No longer included in the cumulative effect of the doll types and still not situated in real space, these religious Israeli dolls came to function as memorial objects for the diaspora. In time, the religious male doll triumphed as the most visible image of Israel abroad and in opposition to the normative image of the religious Eastern European man in Israel as a reified figure in the national landscape.

Consuming Dolls

Scholars from a wide range of disciplines have identified Disney's amusement parks as a rich resource for the critical analysis of popular culture and have analysed Disney's miniaturisation, commodification and organisation of the world as highly relevant to popular conceptions of the geo-political landscape (Baudrillard 1996, 2004; Moore 1980). In Disney's flume ride 'It's a Small World', Israel is included among the nations of the world, which are staged through nearly three hundred automated rubber dolls in national costumes (and two hundred other automated figures). Originally designed by artists Marc Davis (1913–2000) and Mary Blair (1911–1978) for the 1964 Pepsi pavilion for the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) in the New York World's Fair, artists Alice Davis (b. 1929) and Joyce Carlson (1923–2008) designed all the new dolls, including the Israeli dolls, for Disney parks in Orlando (in 1971), Tokyo (1983), Paris (1992) and Hong Kong (2008). At Disney, it is neither *Mizrahi* women nor *sabra* children who represent Israel, but a male and female pair dressed in Eastern European religious costume and dancing under a traditional marriage canopy (*chuppah*) (Epstein 2011) (Figure 7). The modestly clad bride performs an eternal pirouette as her groom, costumed in a wide-brimmed black hat, ritual fringes and a vested black suit that has become standard dress among ultra-Orthodox and Hasidic men of Eastern European descent, performs the religious benedictions over a ceremonial cup of wine.



Figure 7: Israel display in 'It's a Small World' ride in Disney World, Orlando, Florida. Photograph by author.

Whatever the original meanings associated with *haredi* costume dolls in Israel's doll-making industry and whatever intentions female doll-makers had in absorbing the European aesthetics of the Bezalel artistic milieu, the importation of Eastern European costume and ultra-religious gender notions to represent the secular country of Israel carries more radical implications in the context of Disney's schematic geo-political landscapes. In Iser's reception scheme, the importation of familiar texts into new contexts estranges the viewer, who must fill in the gap between the familiar object and the defamiliarised context from his/her own frame of reference to 'create something new' (1978: 15). It is easy, for example, to see how non-Jewish or non-Israeli visitors may interpret Disney's representation of the modern state of Israel through Eastern European costume as suggesting a Jewish colonialist presence in the Middle East.

Such globally-focused interpretations are an important venue for analysis, but a close reading of the costume choices for 'It's a Small World' suggest that Disney's doll-makers and amusement park creators tried to deal with specifically Jewish sensitivities (Archer 1997; Nooshin 2004). In order to access this narrower goal, scholars must consider not only that which is concretely represented in the display but also that which is merely suggested. Disney's choice to represent Israel with a traditional wedding ceremony communicates the celebration of love and the growth of the nation but it also references the most controversial issue at the heart of the domestic secular-religious divide in modern Israel: marriage. Beginning in 1953, Israeli law assigned the performance of marriage to the jurisdiction of the Chief Rabbinate of Israel, making Orthodox rabbis the only legal officials empowered to officiate Jewish weddings. As a matter of state law, the Chief Rabbinate denies marriages between Jews and non-Jews, Jewish males of the Priestly class (*kohanim*) and female converts, and requires 'questionable' Jews, such as Ethiopian and Russian immigrants, to undergo conversion before marriage, a situation that has led to many couples opting to perform wedding ceremonies abroad (Tabory and Levtzur 2009). Disney's *chuppah* mis-en-scène communicates that the couple on display are Jewish by religious legal standards (*halakha*).

If the *sabra*, *Mizrahi* and *haredi* dolls enact the three main ideological positions towards identification with the Jewish state, the wedding ceremony poses the divisive 'Who is a Jew?' question (Ben-Rafael 2002; Rubinstein and Medina 2005). The representation of Israel through the religious marriage ceremony imbues the intra-Jewish question 'Who is a Jew' with national (rather than strictly religious or social) significance, a debate that drives a wedge into the multicultural and secular Zionist vision of the original doll-making enterprise. While the early religious dolls did not exercise any image of authority or even occupy real places in the landscape, Disney's *chuppah* ceremony imagines the physical (and legislated) presence of an Orthodox rabbinical authority and declares the exclusive authority of the rabbinic courts on determining who is a Jew.

Apart from the religious overtones of its Israeli display, Disney's gender content appears to have been consciously designed to accommodate not normative Israeli views, but the religious sensibilities of its most religious citizens, over the broad issue of the role of women in Israeli society and the smaller, but no less controversial issue over the sexual modesty (*tzniut*) of women. In the Disney ride, the bride's face is veiled and she is dressed in a long-sleeved gown with opaque white tights in accordance with ultra-Orthodox and Hasidic practices (Muchawsky-Schnapper 2012). At the entrance to the religious Israeli neighbourhood of Mea Shearim in Jerusalem, a large sign boldly requests that female visitors dress 'modestly' in both Hebrew and English (rather than the native Yiddish of its largely anti-Zionist inhabitants): 'To Women and Girls who pass through our neighborhood, we beg you with all our hearts: Please do not pass through our neighborhood in immodest clothes. Modest clothes include: Closed blouse, with long sleeves. Long skirt – no trousers, no tight-fitting clothes. Please do not disturb the sanctity of our neighborhood and our way of life as Jews committed to G-d and his Torah'. Signed by the 'neighborhood rabbis, Torah and welfare institutions, and local resident councils', the sign has been a source of bitter division in the broader Israel among secular Jews who see its request as contributing to the marginalisation of women by a community that publicly rejects the Zionist premises of the country.

In placing the bride on a rotating disk under the marriage canopy, Disney enacts Israel's national pastime of dance. However, the sort of dance being performed by the solitary figure of the bride does not align with the normative Israeli image of dance such as the frequent portrayal of *sabra* boys and girls dancing with each other in a circular *hora* folkdance. That type of communal dancing would be a sore point for religious Jews of the Orthodox and Hasidic denominations who forbid co-gendered public dance (a practice derided as 'mixed dancing') or even public female dance, with the exception of the Hasidic wedding celebration where the veiled bride dances with the community's spiritual master and male relatives (Ingber 2011; Muchawsky-Schnapper 2012). The marriage canopy frames the bride's dance as the prescribed wedding ritual of the bridal encirclement of the groom, who, in turn, holds a *kiddush* cup in his hand (rather than his bride). With its somewhat tortured solutions to contemporary Orthodox perspectives on the Jewish State, rabbinical authority and gender politics, Disney's Israeli doll display represents non-normative Israeli perspectives. While a non-Jewish viewer of Disney's Israel tableau may interpret the scene as a veiled commentary on Israel's right to exist in the Middle East, an

Israeli viewer would interpret the *chuppah* as a fraught symbol of the religious struggle against secular nationalism.

In comparing Disney's choice of costumed dolls to the aesthetics of the independent Eastern European immigrant doll-makers in the Yishuv and the *Mizrahi* doll-makers in the workshops, a certain irony emerges. In a display meant to celebrate the diversity of the world's cultures, Disney manufactures Israeliness through dolls that communicate the rejection of ethnic diversity or a broad communal reality; instead, Disney's Israel-dolls point to an idea of statehood intertwined with the declaration of a narrowly prescribed religious identity.

Disney's representation of the Israeli nation-state is not at all in the same orbit as the Israeli costume dolls that portrayed a collection of types, such as the religious Eastern European, the Middle Eastern Jew, and the *sabra* child. These individual dolls served as functionaries of a group identity or, after the Holocaust, even as a memorial symbol for the loss of the Jewish diaspora and its diverse communities. Rather, in singling out the one Israeli doll that Israeli doll-makers created to co-exist only with the other doll types, Disney imagines a Jewish state that has found harmony – not between Israelis and Palestinians or between Israel and its surrounding Arab countries – but between Jewish religion and secular statehood.

Conclusion

The history of dolls representing Israel serves as an identifiable example of national symbols, not as superimposed ideologies, but as continually emerging texts that rely on cultural context. Within Israel's doll-making industry, neither the female dolls with multicultural intonations nor the male ones with religious identification remained stable objects, nor was the selection process controlled by the state or even the country's normative view of itself. While the production of costume dolls offered immigrant women a way to participate in the dominant culture and to crystallise the nation's sense of itself, the marketing and sale of the dolls invited pluralistic representations onto which consumers could project their own identities as Israelis, diaspora supporters, or tourists. In the collecting or retrospective stage of the doll's life, government-sponsored institutions such as the Israel Museum and commercial enterprise such as Disney World could again imbue the national costume doll with still other meanings.

The reception history of Israeli national dolls reveals the doll as a complex and contested medium of national identity. The Israeli costume doll began as a mode of self-representation for Eastern European immigrants who had been trained in fine arts institutions in the 1920s, then used as a tool for the integration of Jewish women from Islamic countries into Israel's production economy, and then served to help Jewish tourists to identify with Israel in the aftermath of the Holocaust. Despite the intentions of the doll-making industry within Israel, with its welfare programs aimed towards the cultural and economic integration of women, the dolls' travelogue into new cultural contexts of Israel's tourist market allowed the male-centric Eastern European doll – the least Zionist symbol of Israel – to take hold abroad. Although it is more a function of the international tourist market than the domestic artistic project that the religious male doll emerged as the dominant image of Israel abroad, understanding this

story does not invalidate the dolls. The same western consumers who chose to identify with the future of Israel through the image of the Eastern European religious man as a symbol of the 'ingathering of exiles' or, after the Six-Day War, the 'End of Days', helped to financially support the female artists that immigrated to Israel. If this religious male image of the Eastern European Jew radically differs from the normative Israeli image of itself as secular, multicultural and inclusive, it is undeniable that the decades-long exchange between Israeli immigrant women and western Jewish consumers helped bridge the Jewish diaspora with the Zionist project in Israel.

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