

A DOLL MUSEUM IN ATHENS

By Nerida Watson

During August and September of 2018, I decided to book myself on an organised tour of Greece that included the mainland and three popular islands. I'd heard rave reviews from a friend, who took the same tour in 2017, so had quite high expectations, but my tour was even more wonderful than I expected. The ancient archaeological sites such as The Acropolis and Delphi are truly inspirational, the landscape more varied and beautiful than I imagined, the people warm and friendly and the food some of the best I've enjoyed anywhere in the world!

I had pre-booked three extra nights at a B& B in the historical Plaka District of Athens, at the conclusion of my tour: Searching on-line for things to see, I came across a comment on Trip Adviser mentioning a Toy Museum in an outer suburb of Athens. Being a toy and doll collector in my home of Perth, Western Australia, this instantly caught my attention. On further investigation, I discovered that the collection was part of the Benaki Toy Museum, which had only been open to the public since 2017. The Museum website stated that the collection, "based on the collection of Maria Argyriadi... is among



LEFT: A rare, all wooden "George II" doll, made in England c.1740. **MIDDLE LEFT:** A very pretty "Jumeau" doll, complete with her original outfit and bonnet. **MIDDLE RIGHT:** The sweet expression of this Schoenhut girl doll drew my attention. These dolls were produced in the U.S.A. between 1911 and 1930. This doll has carved, braided hair, painted brown. Her face paint appears original and in lovely condition. She is wearing an attractive white, "broderie anglaise" dress, not original, but it looked old and suited her well. **RIGHT:** A very unusual but striking, lady fashion doll, that was listed as being made of ivory and produced in China in the 18th century.

the most important in Europe" it included "toys, books, ephemera, clothing and other items associated with childhood, from Europe, Africa, Asia and the Americas". The opening hours, 10:00 to 18:00, Thursday to Sunday, coincided with my days in Athens, the museum could be reached by a tram departing from Syntagma Square just 10 minute walk from my accommodation. What could be better?

The tram ride took just over half an hour, a pleasant ride that took me past local beaches. When I alighted the tram at the designated stop, it wasn't too difficult to find the museum building on the opposite side of the road - it looks like a medieval castle from the outside. The building's interior is impressive, with its high ceiling, walls painted with amazing frescoes that look like real wood, intricate, patterned flooring tiles, stained glass and a prominent red marble fireplace, one gets a feeling for the former grandeur of this once-private mansion. The building, which dates back to 1897, was donated to the Benaki Museum in 1976, in accordance with the wishes of its former owner, Athansios Koulouras, a shipowner who lived there until his death in 1953.

After paying the 9 Euro entry fee, I first had to visit the ladies room and was delighted to see that male and female were indicated by boy and girl Kathedolls, a favourite maker of mine.

Then it was time to explore! I had been given a guide to the museum floorplan on entry since the collection is extensive and displayed over two floors in the large building.

The toys throughout the museum were carefully arranged in large glass cabinets and clearly labelled with numbers. You could then locate information about the numbered toy, both in Greek and in English, on an information board, attached to the cabinet. In the first room I entered were "Toys in Antiquity", playthings from ancient times, including terracotta dolls dating as far back as the 2nd and 3rd centuries B. C. and some elaborately carved bone and ivory dolls. One particularly detailed carved bone doll, probably made in Egypt in the 3rd or 4th century, was still wearing an earring consisting of a bronze hoop with a bright

coral bead attached! I was particularly intrigued to find knucklebones of bone, glass and bronze displayed. They were dated between the 1st and 3rd centuries A.D. "Knucklebones" or "Jacks", a game I played with plastic "knucklebones" in the 1970's, was a popular pastime of children all over the Mediterranean throughout antiquity.



"Miss Kellermann", a mechanical swimming doll, representing the famous Australian swimmer turned Hollywood actress, Annette Kellerman (1887-1975). I became fascinated by her story as a child, after watching the Esther Williams biopic of 1952 entitled "Million Dollar Mermaid". The doll looked to be all composition, was made in France, c1910, and was mint with her original box.



ABOVE: A rare 8 inch (20cm) Schoenhut President Theodore "Teddy" Roosevelt figure from "Teddy's Adventures in Africa" safari play set c.1909, standing beside his safari tent. He has a jointed, all wood body, with hand painted facial features, including the spectacles with chain and his distinctive moustache. He is wearing his original safari suit and holding a rifle.



RIGHT: The Museum displays included a large number of tin toys, including cars, boats and a fire engine.



ABOVE: A Bebe Jumeau in part of her original box.

ABOVE RIGHT: Located in "Toys in Antiquity", was a detailed carved bone doll, probably made in Egypt in the 3rd or 4th century AD, which was still wearing an earring, consisting of a bronze hoop with a bright coral bead attached.



RIGHT: To my surprise "Knucklebones" or "Jacks", a game I played with plastic "knucklebones" in the 1970's, was a popular pastime of children all over the Mediterranean throughout antiquity. The knucklebones in this picture, which were dated between the 1st and 3rd centuries AD, were made of glass and bronze, as well as bone.



BELOW: A very pretty blue eyed, blonde haired bisque fashion doll, made by Jules N. Steiner c. 1892, which looked to be in all original clothing. She had a large trunk full of extra clothes, hats and other beautifully detailed accessories. There was even a small corset in her trunk!



Next my attention was grabbed by "Fashion Dolls. Mechanical Toys and Building Sets". There were a number of lovely antique dolls and accessories in this section but one that particularly caught my eye was a very pretty blue-eyed, blonde-haired bisque fashion doll made by Jules N. Steiner in 1892, which looked to be in all-original clothing. She had a large trunk full of extra clothes, hats and other beautifully detailed accessories. I could even see a small corset in her trunk! There were also some rare antique "automata" or mechanical dolls in this section. One was a very finely sculpted brown bisque boy, sitting on a stool playing a banjo, he was made in France c.1900 by Gustave Vichy. A touch screen beside the display cabinet showed the mechanical dolls working, which was a great museum addition. Another automated toy that intrigued me was "Miss Kellermann", a mechanical swimming doll representing the famous Australian swimmer turned Hollywood actress, Annette Kellerman (1887-1975). She was famous for holding her breath underwater and swimming as a mermaid in giant fish tanks! I became fascinated by her story as a child, after watching the Esther Williams biopic of 1952 entitled "Million Dollar Mermaid". The doll looked to be all composition, was made in France, c.1910, and was mint with her original box!

Just as I was about to leave this room, I saw, almost hidden, in shadow on a bottom shelf, a toy from one of my personal favourite toy makers, Albert Schoenhut of the U.S.A. On further inspection, I realised that I was looking at figures and animals from a "Teddy's Adventures in Africa" safari play set, including the very distinctive moustached President Theodore Roosevelt figure, wearing a safari suit and holding a rifle, with another member of his hunting party, some African porters, three African animals and various accessories, including African huts and a tent. This playset was first produced by Schoenhut in 1909 in the U.S.A., to commemorate the President's famous safari in that same year and production continued until 1912. All the figures had sturdy, jointed wood bodies and were hand painted. Thousands of specimens from this safari were gathered for the Smithsonian Institute and the American Museum of Natural History in New York. I would have loved to have a few of these figures as specimens for my own collection!

Excited by what I had already seen, I headed down a flight of stairs to Room 13, the large central room on the basement level, labelled "At the Toy Stores". I was overwhelmed as I first entered this room! It was set up

so that you could imagine yourself toy shopping at Christmas time.... There were toys of every description displayed in this room, including cloth and bisque dolls by Lenci, Schoenhut, Kathe Kruse and Jumeau, also mechanical toys, tin toys of every description, model cars and boats, train sets, a large farm set, vintage board games, some lovely Steiff animals and even a Noah's Ark. One of the many standouts included a breathtaking, child-size wooden grocery store, made in Germany between 1920-1930, in mint condition and displaying delectable-looking cakes amongst it's 89 different products! A large, eye catching 3D paper theatre, published by Schmidt and Romer of Germany, c. 1890, with cardboard figures in place, looked like the curtain had just been raised for the very first performance of a play called "The Sniper." I had recently acquired a small 12cm dressed, mechanical pig, made of cloth and metal by Schuco of Germany, which plays a drum when you wind him up with a key so I was delighted to find an almost identical Schuco pig in this collection which played a violin instead of a drum. Surrounding him were a whole band of similar wind-up characters, in the form of clowns, monkeys and even human figures, each playing either a drum or violin. (I have since discovered there is a third pig that plays a flute.) These appealing little figures were made in the early 1930's.

After what seemed like an age, I moved on. The next displays I encountered were more specific to the history of Greek toys and traditional childhood pastimes. Amongst the exhibits were handmade toys, as well as other childhood objects. There were a number of dough creations, including a number of snakes, which were made by Greek mothers for their sons for Easter. The snake is a symbol of fertility in Greece. I loved the display entitled "At the Festival Stalls", with an array of brightly coloured small novelty toys arranged on and above a large table, enticing

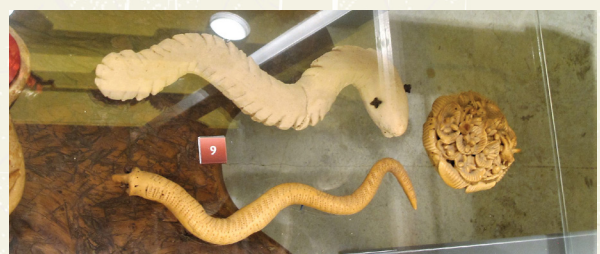
children to spend their precious savings. I was amazed at how many of these small novelty items had been so well preserved. From 1920, cottage industry craftspeople set up toy stalls at religious festivals. Looking at the stalls reminded me of going to the Royal Show in Perth as a child and the excitement I felt deciding what I would purchase with my limited savings.



A large, eye catching, 3D paper theatre, published by Schmidt and Romer of Germany, c. 1890, with cardboard figures in place for a play called "The Sniper."



There were a number of 5 inch (12cm) mechanical figures, made of cloth and metal, by Schuco of Germany in the 1930's. The figures, including pigs, clowns and monkeys, each play instruments when they are wound with a key.



Dough creations, including a number of snakes, which were made by Greek mothers for their sons for Easter. The snake is a symbol of fertility in Greece.



A child-size, wooden grocery store, made in Germany, between 1920-1930, displayed 89 different items, including a number of cakes and pastries.



A display entitled "At the Festival Stalls", with an array of brightly coloured small, novelty toys arranged on and above a large table. From 1920, cottage industry craftspeople set up toy stalls at religious festivals.

Just when I thought that I had seen so many delightful exhibits that there couldn't be much more to see, I came to a room where even more wonderful antique dolls were displayed! There was a whole cabinet devoted to some of the most beautiful antique dolls I have had the pleasure of seeing up close! A collector would love to possess any one of these stunning dolls but there were a few stand outs: These included a wooden "George II" doll made in England c.1740, a Gaultier fashion lady doll c.1860 and one of the prettiest Jumeau dolls I've ever seen, complete with her original French "haute couture" outfit. There was even a very unusual ivory lady fashion doll listed as being made in China in the 18th century. There were quite a few fine German dolls, including Kammer and Reinhardt and Simon and Halbig, but one doll particularly caught my eye and I dearly wished that I could have taken her home with me. Although not labelled, I instantly recognised her as a wooden Schoenhut doll, produced between 1911 and 1930. This one had carved, braided hair, brown painted eyes and the sweetest expression! She was wearing an attractive white, "broderie anglaise" dress, not original, but it looked old and suited her well.

Also displayed in this room, which I found very interesting, were some vintage metal Greek soldier figures carrying rifles with bayonets and wearing the traditional fancy Greek costume, with skirts, tasselled caps, long socks and pompoms on their shoes. There was an assortment of cannons, tanks and other war toys with them. Being a lover

of antique cloth dolls, I must also make mention of one that caught my attention in this room. Standing in a cabinet, with a mix of vintage toys, a lot of them tin, was an adorable "Pinocchio" doll, by Edouard Raynel of France c. 1930's, that looked to be all felt and in mint, all original condition.

The final room I investigated contained reminders of Greek schools in the past. As a teacher, as well as someone with an interest in social history, I found this very interesting. A lot of the items looked very familiar to what we used in Australian schools in the past. There were leather satchels, slate boards, ink pens and old exercise books, quoits, and even a tin lunch box. There were 2 dolls in this display, not labelled but added, I presumed, to represent

a school boy and girl. To my great delight, both dolls were cloth and by my favourite makers. The boy, was a Kathe Kruse wearing a charming spotted, light blue jacket with matching pants and beret. He had painted hair and an adorable painted, cherubic face! The girl was an all-felt Lenci, with tussled blonde hair, and large, side-glancing, blue eyes painted on her slightly pouty face. Wearing a white jumper with blue spots and a short, gathered white skirt, and carrying a matching blue and white ball, she looked like she was ready to play a game of netball, my favourite sport as a girl.

I was starting to tire by now so reluctantly I headed back upstairs to the foyer entrance. Just as I was preparing to leave, I met a lovely lady called Mary Vergos, who it turned out had worked with Maria Argyriadi and the Benaki Museum to help create the



Vintage, possibly lead, Greek soldier figures carrying rifles with bayonets and wearing the traditional fancy Greek costume, with skirts, tasselled caps, long socks and pompoms on their shoes.



LEFT: “Pinocchio” doll, by Edouard Raynel of France c. 1930’s, that looked to be all felt and in mint, all original condition.

MIDDLE: An all cloth, vintage Kathe Kruse boy doll made on Germany. He is wearing a charming spotted, light blue jacket with matching pants and beret. He has brown painted hair and an adorable, painted cherubic face.

RIGHT: An all felt Lenci, with tussled blonde hair, and large, distinctive, side glancing blue eyes painted on her slightly pouty face was another favourite of mine. She is wearing all felt clothing consisting of a white jumper with blue spots and a short, gathered white skirt. A matching blue and white ball in a net bag is attached to her right arm. With her white felt shoes and short white socks, she looks ready to play a game of netball, the most popular sport for females in Australia.

displays. When I told Mary that I was from Australia and belonged to a Doll & Toy Collectors’ Club, she asked me if I would like to meet Maria, who happened to be in the building at the time. Maria was very gracious and pleased to hear how much I enjoyed the Museum. She suggested that Mary give me a personal guided tour. Mary was great! She answered questions that I had and, knowing that I had already looked around, pointed out a few items special to her, including a wonderful doll house that she had helped to furnish.

All too soon it was time to leave but we agreed to keep in touch. Sadly, just a few months after returning to Australia, I learned that Maria had passed away. Fortunately, her wonderful legacy remains, a high quality

museum which reminds us of the times past, when toys were cherished and not discarded as soon as the next ‘fad’ came on the market.

Anyone who has the good fortune to visit Athens should see the Acropolis, the National Archaeological Museum and the site of Ancient Agora, but if you have any interest in toys or social history, then allow at least a couple of hours to visit the Benaki Toy Museum. If you have a special interest, like me, allow half a day! And you could pack a picnic and enjoy it by the seaside nearby after your visit.

References:

Website for Benaki Toy Museum: www.benaki.org



The Benaki Toy Museum, looks like a medieval castle from outside. The building, which dates back to 1897, was donated to the Benaki Museum in 1976, in accordance with the wishes of its former owner, Athansios Koulouras, a shipowner, who lived there until his death in 1953.



Merida (left) with Mary Vergos, who worked with Maria Argyriadi and the Benaki Museum to help create the displays.



Merida was privileged to meet Maria Argyriadi, a collector, researcher and conservator of toys, who donated her personal collection of over 20,000 items to the Benaki Museum for others to enjoy.