

# Portrait of an Antique Doll Collector

by Valerie Fogel



J.N. Steiner FR A2; fully jointed compo body; stamped body; Petite Parisienne, 8.5 inches; Theriault's Gold Horse pick

Ah, the Collector! Such a colorful and assorted lot! No two with exactly the same quest or strategy. No two borne of the same inspirations or influences. As fascinating and dear as dolls are, they are enhanced and romanced by the very collectors that cherish and care for them. A doll in a vendor's booth, regardless how spectacular or modest the display, will sparkle more brightly once placed "just so" in a proud collector's cabinet. And every antique doll collector, like every doll, has a unique style and special grace by which her treasures are acquired, displayed and cared for. One such special collector, a west coast native, is Sheryl Varon.

We first met several years ago at the Antique Doll and Toy Show in Bellevue, Washington, an intimate venue filled with exciting vendors and wonderful dolls and displays. Sheryl is not easily missed. An attractive brunette, elegantly understated in dress, with a fashion model's height and proportion, her quiet demeanor belies the intensity of her collecting goals. I remember watching her as a small, pretty Emile Jumeau caught her attention. With a practiced eye and thorough examination,



E3J; straight-wristed, jointed body, fantastic couture ensemble with marked Jumeau shoes; 12 inches.



Francois Gaultier Scroll Mark incised 4, marked body w/orig. paper label on rear torso reading: "Bebe Du Bon Marche"; dark blue eyes that appear brown; 13.5 inches.



Incised Jumeau, size 6; straight-wristed body; original stringing, original trunk and wardrobe; 15.5 inches.



J.N. Steiner FRE A 3; Le Parisienne paper label on lower hip. Straight-wristed body; 10.5 inches.



Emile Jumeau; E1J; straight-wristed, jointed body; original outfit; dark-lined blue eyes; Gorgeous little size 1 EJ; 9 inches.



L-R - French mignonette in original crocheted costume with tiny presentation box w/ clothes & accessories; pale peach bootines; Theriault's Gold Horse selection; 5.5 inches; All original French mignonette in couture costume with braided updo & peach bootines; 5.5 Inches.



Rabery & Delphieu, size 6; composition, straight-wristed body; deep brown eyes; fabulous couture costume; 11 inches.

Sheryl carefully returned the doll to her place on the table. This was an intelligent and thoughtful collector. Yes, the EJ was beautiful, but Sheryl Varon was not about to be swept off her feet by the first pretty doll in the room. We struck up a conversation and chatted about her collecting goals, which I quickly learned were focused on small French bebes. Sheryl laughed easily, seemingly enamored by the sheer joy of being surrounded by sisters of "The Hunt" and a bevy of antique dolls. Since then, we have become friends. I have been inspired by her diligence, her amazing talents and the depth of warmth she possesses. This awareness inspired this article; a canvas of sorts decorated by the influences, experiences and passions of a very special collector.

Sheryl adored both her parents, but was exceptionally close to her dad. She attributes her appreciation for the beauty and artistry of the antique doll to her father, Robert. A talented modern artist and graphic designer, Robert was driven by his artistic aspirations to leave behind the farm he grew up on. Enrolling in an art correspondence course, he juggled his farm chores by day and diligently honed his art skills by lantern light late into the night. Eventually, he succeeded in starting his own sign business, painting for local grocers and business folk, earning his tuition to the University of Minnesota. There he studied math and English and set up an on-campus sign concession, painting signs for the cafeteria's daily specials and other campus events, frequently trading sign work for meals, or sometimes a mere cup of hot chocolate to get through the day. Following the fateful Pearl Harbor attack, he immediately enlisted in the U.S. Army. His diligent math studies qualified him for pilot training school in Tulare, CA, where he met and married Sheryl's mother. Later, time served in North Africa broadened his artistic horizons. He sought and collected European etchings, African figurines, spears and exotic weapons. When his tour of duty ended, Robert enrolled



Petite Simon & Halbig twill over wood-bodied fashion with bisque lower arms; 10 inches.



L-R: Incised Jumeau, size 6; straight-wristed body; original stringing, original trunk and wardrobe; 15.5 inches; Incised Jumeau, size 5; original couture outfit; brown eyes; straight wristed ball-jointed body marked Diploma d'honneur in blue ink; 15 inches; Jumeau E6J; straight-wristed body; 16 inches; Bru Jne 4, fully-jointed wood and composition body; 13.5 inches; (back corner): J.N. Steiner FRE A 9; stamped body, straight-wristed; marked Alart shoes, classic Steiner ribbed-white pique princess style dress. 16 inches.

in the Art Center of Los Angeles and later the Jepson Art Institute. Although fine art was his passion, graphic design was what would pay the bills and support his growing family.

Sheryl and her older sister grew up doing art projects at the redwood patio table in the backyard. Robert provided bits and scraps of colorful papers from artwork otherwise destined for the trash heap. "Dad was always creating something fascinating. His skill level taught me to appreciate quality details that I look for in everything in life, including dolls." A history buff as well, Robert revered and preserved family heirlooms and treasures; his grandfather's gold pocket watch and his father's antique mandolin to name a few. Sheryl grew up appreciating the significance of these priceless articles.

As a visitor at Sheryl's lovely northwest home, I can attest to her eye for detail and beauty. She has indeed followed in her father's footsteps, both in her reverence for the arts through her own talent, and as a collector of the beautiful and unusual. Sheryl has an exquisite and focused collection of French and German dolls, a delightful array of early accessories, whimsical and highly detailed miniature chairs, and a fine eclectic assortment of sculptural objects, with a focus on the graceful curves of the sculpted human hand. Many of her favorite dolls and treasures will be depicted on these pages.

Sheryl and her husband met in college. Not surprisingly, they were both art



L-R: Emile Jumeau; E3J; straight-wristed, jointed body, fantastic couture ensemble with marked Jumeau shoes; 12 inches; Schmitt & Fils 3; straight-wristed, jointed Schmitt body; 11 inches; Size 3 Tete Jumeau; fully-jointed body; 12 inches (dark blue ensemble).



L-R: Simon & Halbig/Kammer & Reinhardt 192; all bisque with closed mouth and unusual taupe painted stockings; 7 inches; Kestner moon-faced doll, Incised II on back of head; straight-wristed, jointed Schmitt-type body; all orig. finish; 10.25 inches; Simon & Halbig 293; 5-piece composition body; open mouth w/teeth; original dress; 5.5 inches.

L-R: Maison Jumeau  
 Poupee peau; jointed kid  
 body; original couture  
 walking suit; 17 inches.  
 Bru Jne 3; chunky leather  
 body with bisque lower  
 arms; original couture  
 costume; 14 inches.



Left: NEED CAPTION



J.N. Steiner, series C 3/0; fully-jointed wood & composition  
 body with graceful long, narrow fingers; original  
 windowpane lace costume; deep blue eyes; French trunk  
 filled with accessories and extra outfits; 10 inches.

majors. His passion leaned to sculpture and three-dimensional architectural design, while Sheryl pursued drawing, painting and printmaking. They shared, and fostered in each other, common interests: "We had a lot of the same sensibilities, including an immense curiosity. Much of our favorite art and design was borne out of the Pre-Raphaelite, fin de siècle and Arts and Crafts movements. Neither of us took things at face value. We were always analyzing cause and effect and the influences of culture in art." Ah...there's that curiosity and discrimination I perceived at our first meeting!

"My husband has great appreciation for anything beautifully made or historically significant and appreciates antique dolls as objects of beauty, artisanship and cultural history." In the late eighties, the Varons left sunny California and spent several years in England. During this time she was separated from her collection of mostly German dolls.

"Interestingly, we didn't come across many dolls when we lived in London. At first, we lived in Marylebone Village (not far from Madame Tussaud's Wax Museum, right off Baker Street behind the Sherlock Holmes Hotel). Then we moved to a lovely furnished flat with huge Victorian windows and tall ceilings. Half the building was destroyed during WWII, so part of it was rebuilt into modern, purpose-built apartments, and our half was the original manor house divided into several flats. We had these cool little balconies. I could open the window and crawl out on the ledge and sketch while looking out at the wonderful private, enclosed garden full of daffodils."



**Simon & Halbig all-bisque mignonette for the French market; original dress and long mohair wig; 6.5 inches.**



**Large French mignonette boy in all-original crocheted costume and blonde wig; beautiful blue eyes with pensive expression; 7 inches.**



**French mignonette in original costume and original curly mohair wig; 4.5 inches.**

Curious, I asked Sheryl how her fascination for detailed miniature chairs and sculpted ladies hands began, and how these collections relate to her love of dolls.

"In London we happened into a hole-in-the wall miniature shop in a remote corner, just under a bridge. They had a dark, dusty back room filled with hidden treasures. The bare bulb in the ceiling was broken, and some of the glass in the cases was cracked. But in that quaint little room I discovered the most wonderful hand-hewn miniature chairs. So authentic and perfectly scaled! I bought a Windsor chair and something else to begin with. After that I was always on the lookout for little chairs. I was amazed that they could make such tiny chairs so detailed and realistic looking.

"I have always gravitated toward beautifully-crafted things...objects can evoke so many memories. They are a reflection of who we are, how we think, how we relate to the world. Growing up, I saved things I found interesting or beautiful. If I couldn't have something that inspired me, I tried to emulate it or recreate it somehow. I always had some sort of ephemera that represented my interests and experiences around me... I am intrigued by people who have no such objects around them... it's something I simply can't wrap my head around!"

Sheryl settled back into her sofa with a steamy cup of tea as she reminisced. "I've always loved dolls from the time I was very little ...I tended to play with them until they were literally hanging by a thread," she laughed. "I started out collecting Madame Alexander dolls, something I missed out on as a child. My parents couldn't afford the best or even the better dolls when we were small. So, it was a really special occasion when we would get a



**Left: J.D. Kestner 117; all-bisque chunky body; all original couture costume; pierced ears; 9 inches.**

**Below: Five inch cloth bodied mignonette with original clothes and tiny woven bourrelet.**



**Kammer & Reinhardt  
192 bisque  
headed doll on  
rarer jointed  
body with  
straight wrists.  
Original  
costume.  
7 inches.**



**Size 4 Incised  
Jumeau; super pale,  
creamy bisque; blue  
eyes; 13 inches.**

**May Freres &  
Cie/Steiner; Bebe  
MASCOTTE E;  
deep blue eyes;  
fully-jointed body;  
13.5 inches**



doll from grandmother or at birthdays and Christmas. Of course there was always a favorite ... usually the most bedraggled, woebegone among them captured my heart... In my art, my primary subject matter has always been people – especially faces. I think the love of dolls and sculpted hands is a natural by-product of that. Dolls, like art, capture humanity at one very specific moment in time.”

As Sheryl describes her past and the influences in her life, my gaze drifts over the lovely dolls in her collection. She has a particular affinity for small French, from sixteen inches down to diminutive mignonettes. A gorgeous Bru Jeune in scarlet, a tiny size one EJ with saucer blue eyes, an early FG with a meltingly beautiful expression and small German dolls with special or unusual appeal are just a few. I appreciate the rarity and distinctiveness in each that called to her; some because of their implicit beauty, some due to the combination of antiquity and presence defined by their complete originality. Her dolls are a central theme throughout the ranch-style home, sharing space with visually stunning architectural drawings and prints, books and objects d’art. The undeniable essence of European influence and exotic locales mingles with a cheerful Parisian melody in the background.

Sheryl perceives her role as a collector as “custodian and caretaker.” I asked her to expound on this view – to share her perception of what the most important tasks of a custodian might be and, conversely, some of the actions she perceives may be a conflict to this role.

“In the beginning I hated thinking of anyone else ‘possessing’ any of my dolls after me. With maturity I realize the very fact someone has cared for and treasured them enabled me to have them as part of my life. I am honor-bound to do the same for others as well as for the dolls. I respect where they have been. Although their clothes are worn and tattered, they are a testament to the doll’s journey. If a doll’s body finish is stable, I feel it is irresponsible to alter or repair it in any way. I’m not a fan of replacing thin wigs for new ones, or switching out fragile, faded garments with the caveat that, if done, all wigs, clothes, shoes, etc., should be accurately recorded, packaged and stored to travel with the doll when she resumes her journey. As dolls are passed from hand to hand, they are subjected to hardship and breakage. As a result authentic wigs, shoes or clothing



L-R: Francois Gaultier; F 1 J block letter bebe; straight-wristed body; 10 inches; May Freres & Cie (later Steiner; this one is probably a Steiner version); MASCOTTE E; fully jointed body; 13.5 inches; Bru Jne 3; bisque arms, chunky leather body; original couture costume; 14 inches; Francois Gaultier Block letter; brown eyes; fully-jointed composition body; 13 inches; Size 3 Tete Jumeau; fully-jointed body; 12 inches (cream ensemble); foreground; in yellow boots a Kestner.



Superb brown-eyed French mignonette in all original presentation box featuring an extra hidden drawer with additional clothes and accessories in pink and blue themes; doll 5.5 inches.



A delightful little 9 inch C Steiner.

may be lost, but suitable replacements can be obtained to meet the needs of a doll requiring a little TLC. As a caretaker, I am against constructing a doll from disparate parts, although if a doll needs an arm or leg replaced, it's acceptable to unite genuine parts from like dolls in order to have one authentic doll. Granted, she won't be original, but everything about her will be in keeping with her original state."

Over time Sheryl's collecting appetites evolved from the cherished Madame Alexander to the German dolly faces. "I never entertained the idea of ever being able to have any French dolls until I inherited some money from my parent's estate. It was easier not to think about it before that, since I couldn't have any of them." With wide eyes she went on to describe the deep gratitude she has for the modest inheritance

that afforded her the privilege of finally acquiring the French Bébés she always longed for. A tribute to the gifts of her parents, especially her father, she said.

There are hours of colorful stories to relate but the afternoon is waning and the dolls beckon. In keeping with the portrait of this collector, we have endeavored to photograph the dolls in their settings, to truly present them as they have been interpreted and carefully displayed by Sheryl, a collector with vision and panache; a dedicated guardian and bona fide treasure seeker. Can't you see the extra sparkle in their eyes?

Sheryl Varon is an active member of the Seattle Doll and Toy Club, where she is able to lend her artistic talents and personal point of view to various creative and educational club projects.