

[Database photo]

Doll

Unknown Seminole artist

ca. 1940-1950

H: 22 1/2"; W: 11"

T0308

<http://www.fenimoreartmuseum.org/files/fenimore/collections/thaw/exhibit1/e10309a.htm>

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The tourist economy in southern Florida grew at a time of critical, imposed, change for the Seminole peoples.[1] In the early twentieth century, the state of Florida began draining the historic Everglades lands of the Seminole to enable its economic and urban development, imperiling Seminole agricultural, trade, and hunting patterns. Federal legislation prohibited the traffic in egret plumes, a primary Seminole economic activity. Meanwhile, tourism to Miami and the Everglades created much needed economic opportunities for Seminole peoples. Some Seminoles participated in “Indian Camps,” performing demonstrations such as alligator wrestling, cooking, and craft making for tourists. [2] Beginning around 1918, Seminole artists created dolls such as this example to sell to tourists. [3]

Seminole dolls had historically been carved by men of wood or made of rags and used for children’s toys or medicine, and sometimes sold. Seminole Ruby Billie identified Rosa Tiger as making the first palmetto doll for her child, and other women then saw the dolls’ potential as souvenirs to sell to tourists. [4] Former Seminole Tribe of Florida Chairwoman and Editor in Chief of the Seminole Tribune Betty Mae Jumper recalled her, her mother, and her grandmother all making dolls as a means of economic survival: “My mother taught me how to make dolls, baskets, bead work and everything... That was before the tribe became organized. That is what I did: sell crafts. Made things and sell it. That is the way we made a living. Her Mother and I used to go a lot; she goes to the sight-seeing boats and we sell things... We would sell dolls and her Mother did... yep, that is the only way we went; living to eat.”[5]

This doll, created by a most likely female Seminole maker in the 1940s or 1950s, depicts a Seminole man wearing the historic dress of a big shirt (*Foksikcòbì*^o in Mikasuki, one of two languages of the Seminoles) [6] including bands of the distinctive Seminole patchwork technique, and a turban. The big shirt—identifiable by the long length and the inclusion of a waistband-- appeared as a style of men’s clothing around 1900. By the 1950s, the big shirt was only worn by a few older men, having been supplanted as a style by shorter “modern” shirts mirroring tailoring in non-Native clothing, and store-bought shirts. [7] While the doll wears a big shirt and turban representative of dress the early twentieth century, the patchwork designs date the doll later. Seminole patchwork—sewing strips of fabric together, cutting those into further strips, and then reassembling those strips into a repeating pattern using a sewing machine—developed in the 1910s, but the slanted patchwork design featured on this big shirt began to be commonly produced in the 1940s and the rotated squares of varying sized pieces in the 1950s. [8]

In dolls such as this, Seminole makers saw an opportunity to create a new product which would attract consumers in the tourist market, as other economic opportunities were diminished by the development and legislation of the settler state. Doll makers mixed purchased materials such as thread and fabric with fiber of the palmetto which was harvested from local plants of the Everglades, embodying in the dolls both external trade and knowledge of the land and its flora.

Their patchwork displayed the skill and precision of its makers in its minute scale. The historical dress exhibited the distinctiveness of Seminole culture. With dolls such as this, makers mediated Seminole representation, negotiating the elements by which Seminole peoples would be remembered following the tourist encounter, when these dolls might end up on display in homes far from the Indian Camps.

While today dolls are commonly made of readily available fabric,[9] palmetto doll making is still a valued form of traditional knowledge as indicated by the 2019 Jr. Miss Florida Seminole's demonstration of palmetto doll making for the pageant. Patchwork seamstresses continue to innovate in the creation of new designs and integration of patchwork into new styles of clothing. For the Green Corn Dance, an annual traditional gathering, new patchwork clothing was donned as part of the ceremonial ritual renewal.[10] Today, patchwork is pieced in designs representing green corn as well as clan totems, such as panthers, and for other festive occasions, like Christmas skirts featuring Santa Claus in patchwork.[11]

[1] The peoples historically identified as Seminole primarily descend from bands of Creek Indians from the greater southeast region who fled settler encroachment on their lands, the Indian Wars, and removal and sought refuge in Florida in the 18th and 19th century. Today in Florida there are three culturally similar groups. The Seminole Tribe of Florida achieved federal recognition in 1957. The Miccosukee Tribe of Indians of Florida refused recognition at that time due to restrictive requirements of the federal government such as English-language only education and gained recognition in 1963 under terms which allowed greater sovereignty. The unaffiliated Mikasuki people refused to capitulate to the federal recognition process and still maintain their independence. Following common practice, I use Seminole as a general cultural descriptor both because the identity of the dollmaker is unknown and because the doll was likely fabricated before the formal Tribal division.

[2] See West, Patsy. *The Enduring Seminoles: From Alligator Wrestling to Ecotourism*. Gainesville, Fla.: University Press of Florida, 1998 for more on Seminole engagement with Florida tourism.

[3] For information on Seminole dolls, see Downs, Dorothy. *Art of the Florida Seminole and Miccosukee Indians*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1995; Archer, Layla Renee. *Seminole Dolls, Seminole Life: An Exploration of Tourism and Culture*. Electronic Theses and Dissertations. Paper 228. 2005. <http://diginole.lib.fsu.edu/islandora/object/fsu:168351/datastream/PDF/view> and Florida Museum, "Seminole Dolls." <https://www.floridamuseum.ufl.edu/sflarch/collections/seminole-dolls/>.

[4] Billie, Ruby with Betty Mae Jumper, Merri Belland, and Doris Dyen. "Ruby Billie Interview for the Seminole Slide & Tape Project." January 27, 1982. Florida Memory Project, State Library and Archives of Florida. Accessed August 13, 2019. <https://www.floridamemory.com/items/show/238241>

[5] Jumper, Betty Mae. "Interview with Betty Mae Jumper," June 28, 1999. Seminole Oral History Collection, Samuel Proctor Oral History Program, University of Florida, 26.

[6] Mikasuki is the indigenous language of the majority of Seminoles. A band located on the Northern edge of Lake Okeechobee, on what is now Brighton Reservation, speak Muskogee-Creek. The two languages are mutually unintelligible, evidence of the ethnogenesis of the Seminole from multiple Native groups across the greater southeast.

[7] Sturtevant, William C., "Seminole Men's Clothing." *Proceedings of the 1966 Annual Spring Meeting of the American Ethnological Society*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1967: 160-174. Reprinted in Sturtevant, William C., ed. *A Seminole Sourcebook*. The North American Indian. New York: Garland, 1987.

[8] See Downs. *Art of the Florida Seminole and Miccosukee Indians* for a thorough history the arts of the Seminole, including chapters on dolls and patchwork. In Blackard, David M, and Historical Society of Fort Lauderdale. *Patchwork and Palmettos: Seminole/Miccosukee Folk Art since 1820 : An Exhibition Sponsored by the Fort Lauderdale Historical Society, March 1 through September 3, 1990*. Fort Lauderdale, Fla.: Fort Lauderdale Historical Society, 1990, the author identifies the development of patchwork designs by decade.

[9] Dollmaker Mary B. Billie spoke of the difficulty of collecting palmetto from which to make dolls. It could take a day or more to locate and harvest a good supply, and necessitated travelling 25 or 30 miles from her home on the Big Cypress Reservation. Billie, with her daughter John translating from Mikasuki, details the entire dollmaking process in this interview.

Billie, Mary B. with Claudia C. John, Doris Dyen and Peggy Bulger. "Interview With Mary B. Billie, Seminole Doll Maker." June, 1980. Florida Memory Project, State Library and Archives of Florida. Accessed August 13, 2019.

https://www.floridamemory.com/onlineclassroom/seminole_dolls/documents/interview/.

[10] Downs, *Art of the Florida Seminole and Miccosukee Indians*, "Chapter 12: Contemporary Green Corn Dance Dress," 259-265.

[11] All as I observed or learned through personal interactions at Seminole and Miccosukee cultural events in 2019 and by following the hashtag #seminolepatchwork on Instagram.

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