

The creative craft of thankfulness

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Abstract:

The Merci Train Mannequins are a collection of 49 dolls dressed by a total of 113 fashion houses, fur houses, and hat and glove makers brought together by the *Chambre Syndicale de la de couture Parisienne* in 1948. As a younger sister of the *Théâtre de la mode* of 1946 and 1947 the Merci Train Mannequins are a unique view of what two hundred years of French fashion looks like if recounted by the great names of the late 1940s. Today, 42 of the 49 dolls reside in the Metropolitan Museum of Art New York. The Merci Train Mannequins were part of the merci or Gratitude Train. In this paper the dolls and their connection to international relationships and politics will be discussed alongside what is currently known about them.

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Introduction to the Merci Train Mannequins

In 2012 the author came across one of the Merci Train mannequins in the online catalogue of the Metropolitan museum of art. Since the dolls were quite a curiosity and a mystery a research was conducted resulting in a BA thesis and an article, and a presentation with the ICOM-Costume Committee at the 2018 Utrecht Meeting. Due to the lack of secondary or academic sources on the subject the history of the dolls was reconstructed through the examination of newspaper articles and press releases from the time the dolls were made. In this paper the history of the dolls will be presented via some of the quotes from the sources that were discovered.

The Merci Train mannequins, (a working name since the collection does not have a specific name) consist of 49 dolls, or rather scaled mannequins that are approximately 1/3 of a full size mannequin, ca. 70-80 cm high. The doll collection depicts two hundred years of French fashion, and in fact this is the title that the collection was given and has been used in various exhibitions of the dolls.¹ The 49 dolls were dressed by a total of 113 companies, 42 dolls dressed by fashion houses, and 7 dressed by fur houses, and the other 64 companies were hat makers, hairdressers, shoe and glovemakers and embroiderers. The reason that so many companies contributed to this collection was because it was organised by the *Chambre Syndicale de la Couture Parisienne*, uniting the companies to create this collection. This collection was not the first time the organisation had their members dress scaled mannequins in couture. In 1946/1947 the '*Théâtre de la mode*' was a successful exhibition of contemporary fashion that travelled the world to show that Parisian fashion was still to the best on a world scale.² The Merci Train mannequins can be seen as a 'little sister' of the

¹ This is the title that is written on the manuscript with photographs that was send with the dolls and is currently held by the Brooklyn museum archive. Access number SCR/OVERSIZE GT860 P18. The title was also used for exhibition in 1950 in the Brooklyn museum.

² Stanley Garfinkel, "The *Théâtre de la mode*: Birth and Rebirth." In Susan Train (ed.), *Théâtre de la Mode - Fashion Dolls: The Survival of Haute Couture*, Portland: Palmer Pletch, 2002. 41-70.

Théâtre de la mode. However, the mannequins are not dressed in contemporary fashion, but rather each fashion house embodied a specific year between 1718 and 1906.³



Figure 1: Photograph of the dolls in Paris while preparing to ship left to right: 1862/Carven, 1873/Madeleine Vramant, 1904 O'Rossen, 1789/Agnes Drécoll, 1870/Balenciaga.

Hidden agendas- how the dolls are connected to politics.

Whereas the *Théâtre de la mode* was a special project invented by the Chambre Syndicale de la Couture Parisienne the Merci Train mannequins were simply one collection of gifts amidst of many objects. To understand their origins, the origin of the Merci Train must be understood. In the last 3 months of 1947 a big and dramatic project was undertaken in the US. A Friendship Train went from LA to New York and collected foodstuffs along the way. The content of this Friendship Train is meant for the recovering Europe, France and Italy to be precise. The brain behind this initiative is Drew Pearson, a widely published political journalist who on 11 October 1947 argues that often American help is not identified as such by the Europeans – they sometimes think the aid has come from communist Russia. Pearson, who has opinions about anything political, argues that a great dramatic gesture from the people of the US to the people of France and Italy with the right advertisement (American flags would be put anywhere to identify the food as a friendly sacrifice from the US) would improve the relationship between the countries.⁴ The sending of aid to France and Italy was no coincidence- in these countries communism was the strongest.⁵ Pearson insisted however that the train was not a political gimmick, it was bringing the people of the two countries (the US and France in this case) closer together.

³ Various sources give different dates- In a letter from the chambre syndicale de la couture Parisienne send about the dolls currently kept at the library of congress published at 'trainsandtrains.dk 1706-1906 is mentioned. The original manuscript in the Brooklyn museum dates the first doll 1718, however in her publication in 1950 Michelle Murphy gives 1715 as the date for the first doll, ever since the Marcel Rochas doll is known as from the year 1715 instead of 18. 1718 was the year that crinolines were first used, and for this reason it is a meaningful year.

⁴ Drew Pearson, "DREW PEAWON SAYS: EUROPEANS SHOULD BE SHOWN U.S . AID IS FRIENDLY SACRIFICE ON OUR PART: "FRIENDSHIP TRAIN" THROUGH HEART OF U.S, SUGGESTED FOR INSPIRATION TO HELP LESS FORTUNATE." *The Bell Syndicate*, Inc. October 11 1947a, , sec. Washington merry-go-round

⁵ Wendy L Wall,. *Inventing the "American Way" : The Politics of Consensus from the New Deal to the Civil Rights Movement*, New York: Oxford UP, 2008. p. 246

The merci or Gratitude Train

'Here is the inside story of the 'Train of Gratitude', the French reply to the Friendship Train.' - Drew Pearson.⁶

According to Drew Pearson Merci Train is France's answer to the American friendship train. However, the French see the train as a thank you for all help from the us since 1939.⁷ The '*Train de la reconnaissance française au peuple American*' or *Gratitude Train* was a train consisting of 49 boxcars from the first world war, so-called 40-et-8 boxcars. The boxcars were elaborately decorated and are seen as important artefacts in themselves. Each US state would receive one boxcar filled with gifts, and the 49th would be shared by the district of Columbia and Hawaii. There was a great mix of contents- from children's dolls to handmade wedding dresses and paintings, France showed what it was good at. Louis Cast, the chairman of the veterans committee that helped organise the train, described the purpose of it as the following:

"For the first time since the liberation, France, by the Train of Gratitude, is going to prove that she knows how to remain worthy and is going to show that she has lost nothing of her greatness in spite of her trials." NYT October 19, 1948.⁸

The Merci Train Mannequins are quite a special group of objects that were not only specifically made for the train, but also of great value. As such they are often mentioned in the press at the time, described as being worth a 1000 dollars each.⁹ The dolls in their shape are closely related to the *Théâtre de la mode* and although there does not seem to be a direct commercial purpose for the mannequins they do function as little ambassadors to French fashion.



Figure 2: 1896 Doll 'Bruyere', photograph from 1948 in the workshop of the company.

⁶ Drew Pearson, *Washington merry-go-round*, 1 July 1948.

⁷ "France's 'Train of Gratitude' Will Start Collecting Soon before Visiting America." *The New York Times*, 19 October 1948.

⁸ "France's 'Train of Gratitude' Will Start Collecting Soon before Visiting America.", 19 October 1948.

⁹ "Grateful France Sends Gratitude Train to City." *Buffalo Courier-express*, 19 February 1949.

The history of the dolls in New York

When the dolls arrive in early January 1949 they are first exhibited in the windows of 590 Madison Avenue in New York City. Virginia Pope describes the display in the New York Times.

*"In fascinating array, forty-nine little ladies from France representing two centuries of fashion stand on display in the show windows of 590 Maddison Avenue covering nearly half a block and around the corner on Fifty-Seventh street."*¹⁰

After a few days of public display on the street, the dolls moved to the main exhibition of the dolls from the New York boxcar on 500 Park Avenue. During this time countless visitors saw the dolls and the other gifts displayed. The dolls were meant to travel each to their own state, however it is decided due to the importance of the collection and the fragility of the dolls that they will not be distributed but rather be housed in the Brooklyn museum of art.¹¹ In May 1950 the museum brought out a press release saying:

*"The Brooklyn Museum is pleased to announce that it has been designated by the National Friendship Train Committee and the Marquise de Potestad as the final recipient of the French 'Merci Train' collection of 49 French costume dolls."*¹²

The dolls were exhibited in 1950 in the museum, and Schiaparelli and Jacques Fath visited it.¹³ However, after this the history of the dolls remain blurry. We do know however that when the dolls were catalogued as part of the Brooklyn museum collection before they transferred to the Metropolitan museum there were only 42 and not 49 dolls. At the London meeting of 2017 I discussed this problem with Ann Coleman, who used to work with the collection at the Brooklyn museum. According to her, although it might not be what you expect from a museum, the disappearance of the dolls is not a complete surprise – the Edward C. Blum Design Laboratory that the dolls were a part of functioned as a study collection for designers and students and it was even possible to 'check out' objects as if it were a library.



Figure 3: *Elsa Schiaparelli and Michelle Murphy*, Edward C. Blum Design Laboratory. B&W photographic print. Brooklyn Museum.

¹⁰ Virginia Pope, "Paris Couture Gift of Dolls Exhibited," *The New York Times*, 9 February 1949.

¹¹ Museum to Get Dolls." *The New York Times*, April 5 1949,

Jessica G Rall. "A Story of International Friendship: The Gratitude Train Mannequins". *Costume Collections: A Collaborative Model for Museums*, 21/22 May 2013. Metropolitan Museum New York.

¹² Brooklyn Museum, "Press releases, 1947 - 1952. ," 07-09 1949.

¹³ 97 Exhibitions: Two Centuries Of French Fashion Elegance, ed. Brooklyn Museum Exhibition Archive, 1/10 2013/2014

<https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/exhibitions/729/Two_Centuries_of_French_Fashion_Elegance>.

Framing and understanding the Merci Train Mannequins

The Merci Train Mannequins are valuable not only because they are priceless artefacts made by the main fashion houses of 1948, but also due to their role as precious artefacts of the Merci Train. The dolls, embodying both two hundred years of French fashion and the quality and craftsmanship of post-war French fashion, seem to seamlessly connect both to the previous *Théâtre de la Mode* and the overall aim of the Gratitude Train. The dolls, preserved as a collection due to their place in the Brooklyn museum and now the Metropolitan Museum speak for themselves, but are even more special when you understand them in their historic context. The character of the Merci Train mannequins is different than that of the *Théâtre de la mode*. Whereas the *Théâtre de a mode* showed contemporary fashion and the great skills and ideas of the French fashion designers, the Merci Train mannequins show the traces of their designers more subtly, but still identifiable. A great example is the 1908 doll of Madame Grès. We don't only see an early 19th century style dress, we see Grès' signature drapery style.



Figure 4: 1908 Doll 'Grès' photograph from 1948

Looking at the documentation that is present such as photographs of the dolls when they were made in France, one thing is very special – the photographs of the dolls in the fashion houses' workshops. Despite the fact that the Merci Train mannequins were produced by the fashion industry, the connection to the 'ordinary Frenchmen' is seen. For instance there are quite some pictures of dolls posing with the workers who dressed them, rather than the designers who imagined them (figures 2 and 5). Both the Friendship Train and the Merci Train, despite the involvement of political or chauvinistic ideas, were mostly meant to connect

the people of the two countries in which the ordinary people provided food for France and the ordinary French could contribute with gifts to the people of the US. In fact the one photograph of a doll with a designer is from Schiaparelli posing with her doll when the dolls were first exhibited in the Brooklyn museum in 1950 (figure 3). After not being seen by the public for sixty years, ten of the dolls were displayed in the exhibition 'American High Style' in the Brooklyn museum. According to a 1950s article the dolls would hold crowds entranced wherever they went.¹⁴ The story of the dolls and their beauty have a way of capturing the viewer- stretching beyond political or commercial messages- as it was said in 1949:

*There is no taint of commercialism about the venture, any more than there was about the food that filled the original Friendship Train. These gifts are heart dictated. They will be received as such.*¹⁵



Figure 5: 1896 Doll Bruyère, photograph from 1948 in the workshop of the company

Acknowledgements

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¹⁴ "With Flair this Month", *Flair - The Paris Issue*, April 1950.

¹⁵ William R. Conklin, "Capital Hails Train As 'Heart Of France' ", *The New York Times*, 7 February 1949.