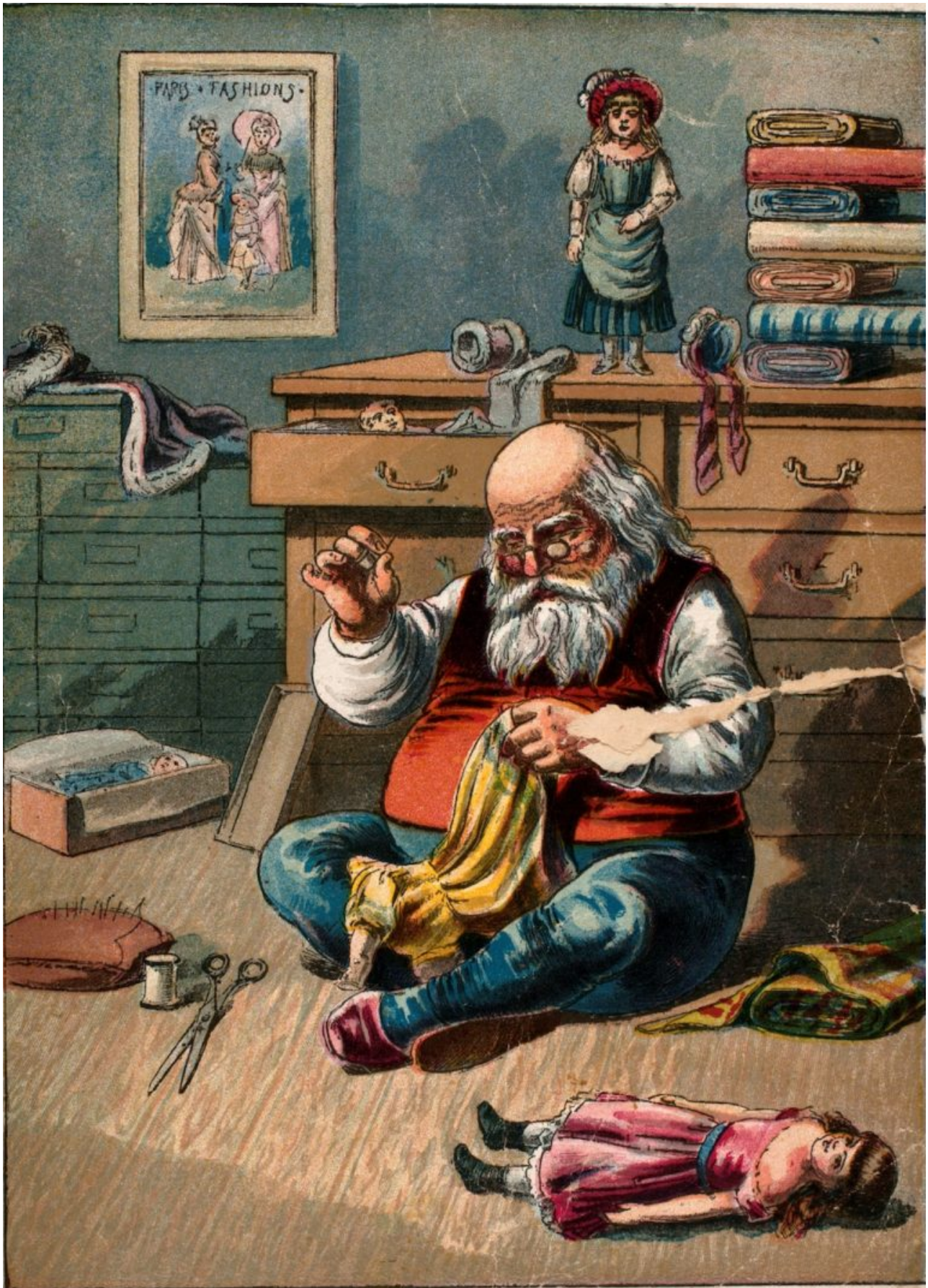
# George’s Story: Dolls and the Material Culture of Christmas




MAKING THE DOLL'S CLOTHES.

This dapper fellow is George (fig. 1). I met George last summer at his current home, the New-York Historical Society. He attracted my attention because he was described as a Christmas gift and I am working on a history of gift giving. According to the accession records, Elise Weidenman received the boy doll, which she named “George,” from Mary Brownell around 1880. I soon found that George had not been alone under the Weidenman Christmas tree. In fact, he had two brothers, Jakie (fig. 2) and Fredie (not pictured), which Brownell gave to Elise’s sisters, Marguerite and Anna. The records listed Brownell as the maker of the dolls. Marguerite, the youngest sister, donated them to the New-York Historical Society in 1946. The records do not tell us who named the dolls, but it is likely that the girls themselves did so.

The New-York Historical Society’s files contain detailed information about the physical construction of the dolls, which are nearly identical. The dolls are 14 inches tall and have wax over composition heads with attached shoulders, and curly blond hair inserted into the heads (fig. 3). They gaze, unblinking, out of lidless black glass eyes, and they have chubby pink cheeks and a closed (and rather small) bow mouth. Their bodies consist of stuffed cloth and kid leather (fig. 4), aside from the lower arm and hands, which are molded composition. Their feet are wooden and painted to look like boots; they are disproportionately small, which is a common characteristic of dolls of this era (fig. 5). The dolls have bellows in their torso to make them squeak when squeezed. They are nattily dressed in little suits with trim on the jacket and pants, beading on the pants, a pleated shirt, and a ribbon bow tie. George wears brown, while his brothers wear black and green. Aside from some wear on the heads, the dolls are remarkably well preserved, and their clothing is in particularly good shape.

Fig. 1. Boy doll “George,” Christmas gift from Mary Brownell to Elise Weidenman, ca. 1880. Clothing consists of brown cloth suit with trim, metal beading at pants waist, white pleated shirt, and blue ribbon bow tie. Object

No. 1946.104. Gift of Marguerite Weidenman. Courtesy of the Collection of the New-York Historical Society, New York.

Fig. 2. Boy doll “Jakie,” Christmas gift from Mary Brownell to Marguerite Weidenman, ca. 1880. Object No. 1946.105. Gift of Marguerite Weidenman. Courtesy of the Collection of the New-York Historical Society, New York.

Fig. 3. Head of boy doll “George.” Wax over composition with painted face, black glass eyes, and inserted blond hair. Photograph by author. Courtesy of the Collection of the New-York Historical Society, New York.

Given that sewing was a widespread and necessary skill for American women in that period, it is quite likely that Brownell made the doll’s clothing (fig. 6). It is less plausible that she made the dolls themselves, however. By the time Brownell gave these gifts, manufactured dolls were widely available and had become popular Christmas gifts for middle-class children, particularly girls. This had not been the case in the antebellum era. Girls from wealthy families, such as the Sedgwick sisters of Massachusetts, received imported dolls for Christmas in the 1820s and 1803s, but such dolls were expensive and thus scarce in middle-class homes. Dolls became increasingly prevalent in Christmas advertisements at mid-century, however. A Pennsylvania merchant in 1851 advertised “an assortment of TOYS and FANCY GOODS for the coming holidays,” including “Dolls and doll Heads.” And the National Anti-Slavery’s

Christmas Bazaar in 1853 listed among its gift items “Dolls of every kind and variety.” Depictions of domestic Christmas scenes often featured dolls among the presents, further promoting them as appropriate gifts. An 1869 version of *A Visit from St. Nicholas*, for instance, featured an illustration by Thomas Nast of children reaping the Christmas bounty (fig. 7). A young girl gazes happily at the doll she has received while one brother plays with his own version of a doll riding a wheeled horse, another grabs at his stocking, and adult members of the family watch from the hallway.

The growing popularity of dolls had both ideological and pragmatic roots in the emerging middle class. Scholars have pointed out that doll play helped to reinforce middle-class gender ideals and train girls in their future maternal roles. But dolls also served as substitute playmates for children (both girls and boys) with fewer siblings to look after, and, along with other toys, they filled the increasing time middle-class children had for play. While these factors contributed to the increasing purchase of dolls after the Civil War, of equal importance were the technological advances that made dolls more available and affordable.

Doll making was one of the crafts transformed by industrialization in this period, and wax over composition construction, like George’s, contributed to this revolution. Composition referred to a form of papier-mâché, which German doll makers began to use for dolls’ heads because it was easily molded, inexpensive, and durable. It did not produce the lifelike skin tones of the more expensive poured wax or porcelain dolls, however. The Germans solved this problem in a cost-effective manner by dipping the molded composite heads in wax to produce a more realistic skin tone and texture. Workers attached the doll heads, generally to cloth bodies, painted the faces, arranged the hair, and dressed the dolls (if they were to be sold clothed). The cheapest dolls had molded and painted hair, while others had wigs. That George and his brothers had inserted hair suggests they were a step up in quality and price. Noise or squeak boxes like those in the Weidenman dolls were also common in German wax dolls.

Dolls imported from Germany dominated the middle to lower range of the U.S. doll market before the First World War, and were joined by French and English imports in American stores. The nascent U.S. doll industry, led by German immigrants, could not compete with the flood of imports, although American inventors patented technologically advanced talking, walking, and creeping dolls (which drew few fans among children). The boom in manufactured dolls and the growth of Christmas present-making encouraged the new department stores to stock dolls and toys, and to open seasonal toy departments. Dolls and doll parts were widely available at a variety of price points by the 1870s, when the Weidenman sisters received their dolls. Emerson’s Grand Bazaar, a Massachusetts department store, claimed to have available for holiday shoppers in 1871 “50 dozen of Wax Dolls, of every description,” as well as “crying” and “floating” dolls. Macy’s 1877 catalogue offered German wax dolls in 10 sizes and at prices ranging from 56 cents to $8.66. In addition to wax and china dolls at varying

prices, stores stocked doll parts, including bodies, arms, and heads of china, parian, rubber, and leather, as shown in an 1875 Emerson's catalogue (fig. 8).

Fig. 4. Torso of boy doll "George." Stuffed cloth and kid leather with squeak box. Photograph by author. Courtesy of the Collection of the New-York Historical Society, New York.

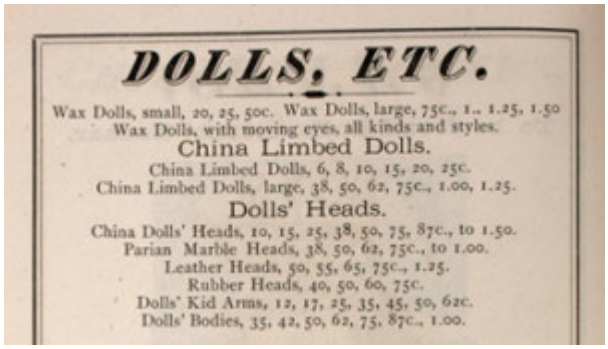
Fig. 5. Legs and feet, boy doll "George." Stuffed kid upper legs, wooden lower legs and feet with painted shoes. Photograph by author. Courtesy of the Collection of the New-York Historical Society, New York.

Why did stores sell doll heads and parts? For one thing, American doll makers concentrated on making body parts rather than the more expensive heads, which they left to European manufacturers in the late nineteenth century. An article in *Harper's Bazar* told women how to select doll heads, bodies, and clothing to make dolls, declaring that "Mothers who want to teach their children correct ideas select each part of the doll with care, and have each article of clothing well made." Thus doll givers could blur the line between a handcrafted and purchased gift by building a doll from parts, in much the same way children build bears and dolls today at the mall. It is quite possible that this is how Mary Brownell made the dolls she gave the Weidenman sisters. Middle-class women such as Brownell were encouraged to supplement the manufactured items dised in their parlors with their own "fancywork," which encompassed such handicrafts as needlework, china painting, hair jewelry, and wax flowers. This fancywork also enabled women to transform a mundane purchased object into a sentimental keepsake by embellishing and personalizing it with their talents—painting a

china plate or making a frame for an inexpensive chromolithograph, for instance. Combining manufactured doll parts and clothing them in hand-sewn outfits was in keeping with this practice. Dolls sold in parts were so many commodities, as the apparently identical heads and bodies of the Weidenman dolls suggest, yet Brownell's probable work in putting the pieces together and sewing the clothing transformed George and his brothers into objects imbued with Brownell's affection for the sisters, if only by virtue of the different colors of their outfits.

Fig. 6. Cropped photograph of boy doll "George." Clothing consists of brown cloth suit with trim, metal beading at pants waist, white pleated shirt, and blue ribbon bow tie. Photograph by author. Courtesy of the Collection of the New-York Historical Society, New York.

Fig. 7. "Girl receiving doll for Christmas from Santa Claus." From A Visit from Saint Nicholas, by Clement Clark Moore and illustrated by Thomas Nast (1869?). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.



DOLLS, ETC.

Wax Dolls, small, 20, 25, 50c. Wax Dolls, large, 75c., 1., 1.25, 1.50
Wax Dolls, with moving eyes, all kinds and styles.

China Limbed Dolls.

China Limbed Dolls, 6, 8, 10, 15, 20, 25c.
China Limbed Dolls, large, 38, 50, 62, 75c., 1.00, 1.25.

Dolls' Heads.

China Dolls' Heads, 10, 15, 25, 38, 50, 75, 87c., to 1.50.
Parian Marble Heads, 38, 50, 62, 75c., to 1.00.
Leather Heads, 50, 55, 65, 75c., 1.25.
Rubber Heads, 40, 50, 60, 75c.
Dolls' Kid Arms, 12, 17, 25, 35, 45, 50, 62c.
Dolls' Bodies, 35, 42, 50, 62, 75, 87c., 1.00.

Fig. 8. This catalog page suggests the range of dolls and doll parts available at a Massachusetts department store. “Dolls, Etc.,” advertisement taken from page 20 of a trade catalogue titled Emersons’ Grand Bazaar Catalogue by Charles Emerson & Sons. Printed by Franklin P. Stiles, Haverhill, Massachusetts (1875). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

An 1883 letter from Alexander Graham Bell to his wife, Mabel, suggests another reason for the sale of parts: doll heads and bodies, particularly those made of bisque and porcelain, were fragile. Moreover, many children played roughly with their dolls, punishing them physically for bad behavior and even “killing” them and holding doll funerals. Whether through such rough play, accident, or carelessness, the Bells’ young daughters had broken the heads of the dolls they had received the previous Christmas. Bell believed it a bad idea simply to replace the dolls’ heads. In keeping with the view that dolls provided maternal training, he wrote that the girls should treat their dolls as if they were their own babies. He argued that, just as a child’s head could not be replaced, neither should a doll’s. Bell concluded that the dolls should be destroyed and his daughters told that “Santa Claus . . . has taken them back as they were not cared for properly.” He suggested “Santa might entrust them with another baby” in the future, should they prove themselves trustworthy mothers. There is no indication as to whether Mabel Bell agreed to this draconian plan, but the following year, when the girls demonstrated their father’s invention for a reporter by telephoning “Santa Claus,” each requesting a new doll for Christmas.

The sale of doll heads and body parts thus provided a practical way to deal with breakable products, as well as allowing for creativity and individual taste in selecting a doll. That the Weidenman sisters’ dolls survived intact suggests that, unlike the Bell sisters, they did not play roughly with their gifts. It is possible that these dolls were displayed rather than played with, particularly since the two older girls were over ten when they received them.

Fig. 9. Santa Claus surveying his handiwork. Gifts include boy and girl dolls. “Loading the Christmas Tree,” from Santa Claus and His Works (Snowflake Series No. 55), by George Webster (New York, 1888). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

Fig. 10. Distributing Christmas gifts to children. “The Christmas-Tree,” engraved by Winslow Homer. Taken from Harper’s Weekly, December 25, 1858. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

One curious aspect of the dolls is their gender. Although this illustration from an 1888 children’s book shows a Christmas tree featuring both female and male dolls (fig. 9), boy dolls were actually unusual among manufactured dolls, constituting perhaps 10 percent of output in the nineteenth century. Why did Brownell give the Weidenman sisters boy dolls? All we can do is guess. Brownell may have been responding to the girls’ wishes for boy dolls to add to their doll collection, or perhaps they were attracted to boy dolls because of their own lack of brothers. Scholars have suggested that dolls could substitute for the siblings missing from the smaller middle-class family. Alternatively, Brownell may have been trying to distinguish her gifts by making them unique by virtue of their gender as well as their clothing. Of course, it may have just been that they had a special on boy dolls when she went shopping for a gift, but this seems the least likely reason for her choice.

Ultimately, the questions of why Brownell chose boy dolls and whether she made them cannot be answered definitively. The growth of the doll industry, the wide availability of dolls and doll parts, and the similarities between German manufactured dolls and the Weidenman dolls all suggest that Mary Brownell did not make the dolls in their entirety. Given Marguerite Weidenman's description of the dolls as made by Brownell, however, it seems reasonable to conclude that in at least some respect they were so. Would the sisters have preserved and treasured them as much if they thought the dolls were not handmade? Or did Brownell's selecting boy dolls, putting the pieces together, and making the outfits transform them from commodities to personalized, "handcrafted" gifts?

An essayist for *The Nation* a few years earlier had claimed that such a transformation was possible, noting that a giver who did not have the time or talent to handcraft a Christmas present could still "buy cheap brown or buff earthen candlesticks and paint them with his own hands till they are more beautiful than the costliest porcelain." Similarly, Brownell could transform imported German dolls or doll parts by sewing stylish little suits for them. Alternatively, according to *The Nation*, the giver could "keep a memorandum-book for the purpose of recording wishes" and purchase the item most desired by the recipient. Given the overwhelming dominance of the market by girl dolls, it seems likely that Brownell deliberately chose boy dolls in response to some desire of the Weidenman sisters. Even if Brownell did not handcraft the dolls, therefore, their preservation suggests that she had used her talents and her knowledge of the Weidenman sisters to transform these commodities into gifts.

Since gifts imply affective relationships, I sought information that might illuminate the connection between Mary Brownell and the three Weidenman sisters. Unfortunately, the documentary evidence is sparse and shows only that Brownell and the Weidenmans lived in Hartford, Connecticut, at the same time in the 1870s. The girls were the daughters of Jacob Weidenmann and Anna Schwager Weidenmann, who immigrated to New York from Switzerland and Germany respectively. (The daughters apparently dropped the final "n" from their surname.) Jacob was a prominent landscape architect, who worked with Frederick Law Olmsted. In 1860, when daughter Anna was a baby, the family moved to Hartford, where Elise and Marguerite were born, in 1861 and 1868 respectively. The Weidenmans moved back to New York in 1874, when the girls would have been 14, 13, and 6. Since the Weidenmans left Hartford in 1874, the girls probably received the dolls from Brownell sometime between 1871 and 1874, rather than the 1880 date estimated in the accession files.

Mary Brownell and her husband Franklin "Clinton" Brownell were living in New Jersey in 1870, but after their infant son's death that year, they returned to Hartford, where they must have met the Weidenmans. Franklin died in 1871, leaving Mary Brownell to raise their four surviving children. The children were close in age to the Weidenman sisters, which suggests they may have been school or play mates in Hartford. There is no indication that Brownell was related to the Weidenmans. It may be that she was a neighbor or friend of the family during their mutual residence in Hartford. Perhaps Mary Brownell and Anna

Weidenman visited as their children played together. Certainly Brownell was quite close to the Weidenman girls to have given them such a Christmas present.

Scholars have suggested that gift exchange in modern societies constitutes a social system for the transfer of affection and the establishment and maintenance of social ties. The domestic ideal, by which the new middle class defined itself in the mid-nineteenth century, produced what Elizabeth Pleck has called “the sentimental occasion,” which both created and reinforced family memories. Chief among those occasions was Christmas, which Americans transformed from a public carnival, marked by feasting and drinking, treating the poor, and boisterous recreation, to a private holiday centered on the middle-class nuclear family. The central ritual of the new, domesticated Christmas was gathering around a Christmas tree and giving children presents, many from the new incarnation of St. Nicholas, “Santa Claus.” Promoted through magazines such as *Godey’s Lady’s Book* and *Harper’s Weekly*, as well as department stores and a growing host of businesses eager to sell holiday gift items, this transformation ultimately shifted holiday gifting from New Year’s Day to Christmas and from the external poor to the family’s children. An 1858 illustration by Winslow Homer for *Harper’s Weekly* helped to naturalize the domestic Christmas by depicting members of an extended family distributing the “wonderful foliage and fruit” of the Christmas tree, including at least one doll, to the children, who are the central focus of the illustration, as they were of the transformed Christmas (fig. 10).

The exchange of gifts on Christmas symbolized the ties of affection that bound family and friends, in contrast to the pecuniary relationships of the market. But gifts were not only symbols. They were actual physical things given and received, treasured or detested, proudly displayed or furtively hidden, even regifted, and ultimately saved or discarded. That the Weidenman sisters named their dolls and preserved them for some seventy years suggests that they cherished these gifts, as does Marguerite’s inclusion of them among the few family items she donated to the New-York Historical Society.

Whatever the specifics of the connection between Brownell and the Weidenmans, the dolls suggest the relationship was a fond one. Nineteenth-century gift advisors defined sentiment as the essence of the gift, just as it was the essence of the family celebration of Christmas. They distinguished the presents exchanged on Christmas and other sentimental occasions from the commodity transactions of the marketplace by creating a Romantic ideal of the gift. In an 1844 essay, philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson chided those who purchased gifts, asserting “it is a cold, lifeless business when you go to the shops to buy me something, which does not represent your life and talent, but a goldsmith’s.” Emerson instead declared that “[t]he only gift is a portion of thyself,” suggesting the handcrafted present as the ideal.

But the line between gift and commodity was not so easily drawn, as the example of the dolls demonstrates. Historian Stephen Nissenbaum has suggested that the domestication of Christmas, ironically, helped to commercialize the holiday, as

the emphasis on gifts for children and other family members meshed with the commercial-industrial economy and its rising production of consumer goods. Indeed, Emerson's disparagement of purchased presents reveals that there was already a thriving trade in these by the 1840s. Commercial gifts had been heavily promoted since the 1820s, and Americans selected holiday presents from among dozens of annual gift books, cakes and candies, toys (including dolls), and a growing array of jewelry, pens, and other "fancy goods" sold by local merchants.

A variety of critics wrestled with this intrusion of the marketplace into the intimate province of the domestic gift. In *Godey's*, novelist and gift book editor Caroline Kirkland lamented the transformation of the gift into "something which can be bought with money," concluding that presents "have almost lost their sweet meaning, and become a meaner sort of merchandize." But Kirkland also valued gifts as "natural expressions of goodwill and affection." Writers in magazines as different as the Methodist *Ladies' Repository* and the *Nation* agreed that the "universal custom of giving presents on commemorative occasions" was "inevitable and necessary," as well as "a pleasant and easy way of expressing one's feelings." Because they valued gift giving, these commentators formulated ways to blunt the force of commercialization. One way they did this was by endorsing the new Santa Claus, who "made" gifts in his workshop and gave them freely. An illustration from an 1888 children's book, for instance, depicts Santa sitting tailor fashion and sewing doll's clothing (fig. 11).

Marguerite Weidenman's recollection of the dolls she and her sisters received as handmade by Mary Brownell places them within the Romantic ideal of the handcrafted gift and suggests that she particularly valued that aspect of the gift. It seems safe to conclude, then, that George and his brothers represented the Romantic ideal of the gift, which owed "all value to sentiment." The ideal gift, according to the *Ladies' Repository,* should reflect "some painstaking of the donor," such as Brownell's likely sewing of the doll clothes, rather than "the greedy eye of trade." But the Weidenman girls' dolls also suggest the role of the marketplace in Christmas gifting. George and his brothers are artifacts of the material culture of the domesticated Christmas, but they are also products of the factory and the marketplace. Despite the idealization of handcrafted presents, they show that Christmas gifts had become enmeshed in the developing economy of consumer goods, and so stood at the intersection of commerce and affection.

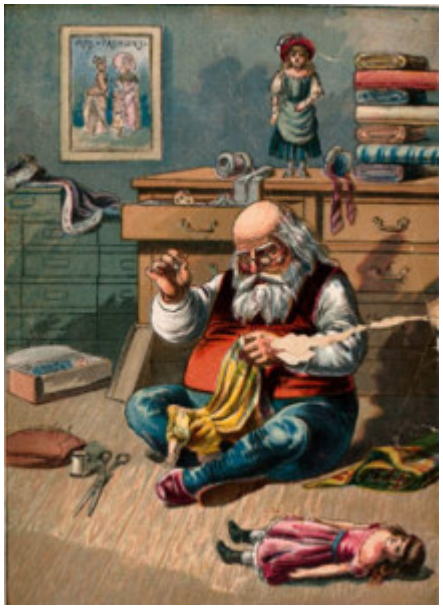


Fig. 11. Santa Claus making dolls. “Making the Doll’s Clothes,” from Santa Claus and His Works by George P. Webster (New York, 1888?). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

## Further Reading

The most comprehensive scholarly study of the history of dolls and doll play in the United States is Miriam Formanek-Brunell, *Made to Play House: Dolls and the Commercialization of American Girlhood, 1830-1930* (Baltimore, 1993). The vast majority of works that touch on doll history are those aimed at collectors. Many provide useful information on doll making and types. See, for example, Jean M. Burks, *The Dolls of Shelburne Museum* (Shelburne, Vt., 2004); Roger Baker, *Dolls and Dolls’ Houses: A Collector’s Introduction* (London, 1973); Eleanor St. George, *Old Dolls* (New York, 1950); Caroline Goodfellow, *The Ultimate Doll Book* (London, 1993).

The best source on the transformation of Christmas is Stephen Nissenbaum, *The Battle for Christmas: A Cultural History of America’s Most Cherished Holiday* (New York, 1996). For a perceptive discussion of the role of the market in the new Christmas, see Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Consumer Rites: The Buying and Selling of American Holidays* (Princeton, N.J., 1995). On the transition to purchased gifts, also see William B. Waits, *The Modern Christmas in America* (New York, 1993). For those interested in the interplay between sentiment and the market in the nineteenth century, two useful works are Elizabeth H. Pleck, *Celebrating the Family: Ethnicity, Consumer Culture, and Family Rituals* (Cambridge, Mass., 2000); Elizabeth White Nelson, *Market Sentiments: Middle-Class Market Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (Washington, D.C., 2004). Nelson touches on the role of fancywork, as does Nancy Dunlap Bercaw, “Solid Objects/Mutable Meanings: Fancywork and the Construction of Bourgeois Culture, 1840-1880,” *Winterthur Portfolio* 26 (Winter 1991): 231-47.

Historians of gift giving must begin with Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. W. D. Halls, foreword by Mary

Douglas (1923; New York, 1990). The best historical discussion of the developing ideology of gifts in market-based societies is James Carrier, *Gifts and Commodities: Exchange and Western Capitalism since 1700* (London and New York, 1995). Other key works examining the relationship between the social and economic meanings of gifts include David J. Cheal, *The Gift Economy* (London, 1988); Barry Schwartz, "The Social Psychology of the Gift," *American Journal of Sociology* 73 (July 1967): 1-11; Theodore Caplow, "Christmas Gifts and Kin Networks," *American Sociological Review* 47 (1982): 383-92; Aafke E. Komter, *Social Solidarity and the Gift* (Cambridge, 2005); Jacques T. Godbout, in collaboration with Alain Caillé, *The World of the Gift*, trans. Donald Winkler (Montreal, 1998).

The Romantic ideal of the gift was articulated by Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Gifts," in *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol. 3: *Essays: Second Series* (1844; Cambridge, MA, 1983): 93-96. Two other useful formulations of this ideal are found in Caroline Kirkland, "Hints for an Essay on Presents," *Godey's Lady's Book* (January 1845): 27-29; and "Festivals and Presents,"*Ladies' Repository* (January 1871): 43-46.

Finally, for anyone interested in looking at nineteenth-century dolls, good digital collections are available online at the Strong National Museum of Play, and the Wisconsin Historical Society, which even allows one to search for boy dolls.

This article originally appeared in issue 12.3 (April, 2012).

---

Ellen Litwicki teaches in the department of History at the State University of New York at Fredonia. Her research focuses on the history of social and cultural rituals, and her publications include *America's Public Holidays, 1876-1920* (2000). She is currently working on a cultural history of American gift giving.