What A Well-Dressed Doll Should Wear

by Pam North

Edith Schmidt grew up in a small town in southern Illinois. With few other children in her neighborhood for companionship, she spent many hours finding ways to entertain herself. A bit of a tomboy, she loved biking and skating, but dolls were a favorite toy. She disliked their lack of flexibility, as most dolls at that time had joints only at their heads, arms. and legs. Although she collected storybook dolls, and had a Madame Alexander doll as well, she eventually lost interest in dolls for many years.

Schmidt's grandmother, aunt, and great-aunt all were very good seamstresses, so she never lacked for clothing. In high school, she took the required home economics class, which included sewing. The first dress she made was simple, but her ability evolved to include somewhat more challenging projects. She made clothes for work, as well as sewing household items. Machine embroidery caught her attention in the late '90s. After meeting a neighbor doll artist who created beautiful cloth dolls with cloth-covered ceramic heads, Schmidt learned from her how to make that type of doll. Realizing the need to further improve her sewing skills, she attended courses on heirloom sewing, learning many techniques of using lace, trims, and beautiful fabrics to enhance the dolls she made. She and her mother traveled together to many doll shows in the Midwest. “Mother was a wonderful ambassador and a great help,” Schmidt reminisced. “She loved our clients, and enjoyed visiting with them. If she couldn't go with me, everyone always asked about her. We had a great time traveling together.”

The family eventually moved from Ohio to Kansas, packing up themselves and the kiln, molds, fabric, and other doll-making equipment. When her mother died at age 93, Schmidt made the decision to transition into creating fashionable doll clothing for BJDs. She had fallen in love with them because they fulfilled her idea of a doll having real posing capabilities, as well as allowing for wig and eye changes. In 2012, she started producing clothing items for BJDs, and she began attending shows and conventions to sell her creations and to meet the BJD artists whose work she admired.

To accomplish her change in direction, she narrowed the spectrum of her creative efforts by discontinuing making cloth dolls, and instead focused on her doll clothing business. “It has been such a wonderful journey, which continues as I meet new artists and learn about the unique features of their dolls,” she remarked. “There is a wonderful feeling of accomplishment when I finish whatever I am making. For me, sewing is a great way to relax, and creating BJD finery is a pleasurable way to enjoy fabrics and laces. I always am looking at fabric to imagine how I can enhance it to get a certain look.” Doll artists who have used her dresses include Linda Macario, Bo Bergemann, Pat Moulton, and Judy Porter.

Her preferred fabrics are batiste, quilting cottons, and laces to create dresses with bloomers of same or coordinating fabric. “It is critical to use fine cotton laces, combined with pin tucks and decorative stitches to embellish the bodice and skirt. For most skirts, I gather a 45"-wide piece of fabric for a nice, full look. When time permits, I like to sew strips of lace together for the skirt, and to make a bodice of lace. Occasionally I change the look of fabric by stitching pin tucks over sections of the fabric. When using cotton prints, the addition of Cluny lace at the neckline, arm holes, and hemline creates a finished look. I always am searching for new suppliers of lace and trims to replace my inventory. Right now, when I work on outfits, I cut four of each size in a variety of fabrics, and set up my own production line. Most of my sewing is done on a sewing machine, with the exception of hand-sewing the snaps.”   
 Schmidt's future plans include continuing to produce dresses/outfits for the various sizes of BJDs, and to expand her inventory of new designs.