

Mom's Joy Room

Where Obsolescence Ends and Wonder Begins

2964 Fairmont Road, Morgantown, WV 26501 | 304-282-3671 | momsjoyroom.net

CERTIFICATE OF AUTHENTICITY

Mabel — Carved Wood Folk-Art Shoulder-Head Doll

American Folk Art, in the Style of China Head Dolls | c.1920–1929 | 20"

ESTIMATED WORTH

\$300–\$650



Mabel — carved wood shoulder head, straw-stuffed cloth body, wooden arms and legs



Details: deeply carved auburn waves, hand-painted features, and carved wooden hands

Meet **Mabel** — a 20-inch carved wood folk-art doll from the 1920s, a hand-made girl created in the image of the fashionable porcelain "china head" dolls of her era. She bears no maker's mark of any kind, and that is precisely the point: Mabel was never made in a factory, and her anonymous maker signed his work the only way folk carvers ever truly did — with the evidence of his own hands. Every wave of her carved hair, every brushstroke of her painted face, and every stitched seam of her straw-stuffed body is a signature in itself. She is one of a kind, and there will never be another.

"Some dolls were born in factories. The special ones were born in someone's hands."

History

From the mid-19th century through the early decades of the 20th, the most coveted dolls in America were German-made china and parian head dolls — glossy white porcelain ladies with molded, glossy-painted black or auburn hair, painted blue eyes, and flat shoulder plates joined to kid or cloth bodies. They were beautiful, fashionable, and often beyond the reach or the reachability of rural and small-town families. Out of that gap grew a genuine American folk tradition: the hand-carved wooden doll made in deliberate imitation of the china head. Cabinetmakers, carpenters, whittlers, and patient parents carved shoulder heads from pine, maple, or whatever hardwood was at hand, then painted the hair in glossy auburn or black waves to mimic the molded porcelain coiffures, painted the facial features by hand, and mounted the heads on sewn cloth bodies stuffed with straw, sawdust, or rags, finished with carved wooden arms and legs.

These dolls occupy an honored place in American folk art — kin to faceless and carved-face rag dolls, pod dolls, and other homemade playthings that scholars of folk toys have documented since the colonial era. Because each was individually made, no two are alike, and because their makers were anonymous craftsmen rather than manufacturers, almost none carry traditional maker's marks. That unmarked quality is not a flaw but a hallmark of the tradition itself. Museums and folk-art collections prize these dolls precisely for what they represent: the impulse of ordinary people to make something beautiful and fashionable with their own hands.

Mabel dates from the 1920s, per the prior collector's documentation — a period when the china-head fashion was fading from stores but lived on in the memory and imagination of home carvers. Her rounded, softly waved auburn hair, arched painted brows, and blue-painted eyes echo the parian dolls of the 1880s–1900s rather than

the bobbed flapper styles of her own decade, suggesting her maker was working from an older, remembered ideal of the "proper lady doll." Her clothes are later replacements — not original — which is common and honest for a doll who was clearly loved and dressed afresh over the years.

Unmarked folk-carved dolls of this type typically bring \$300–\$650, depending on size, carving quality, paint condition, and charm. At 20 inches, with deeply carved (not merely painted) hair, well-detailed carved hands and feet, and a warm, undamaged patina, Mabel sits comfortably in the upper half of that range.

Notable Features

- ◆ Hand-carved wood shoulder head with flat shoulder plate, string-tied to the body — artisan construction, not factory
- ◆ Deeply carved, painted auburn hair in a waved period style — carved, not molded or merely painted
- ◆ Hand-painted facial features: arched brows, blue eyes, closed mouth
- ◆ Carved wooden lower arms and legs with detailed fingers and toes
- ◆ Straw-stuffed, hand-sewn cloth torso
- ◆ Unmarked — consistent with the anonymous folk-carver tradition (no maker's signature, as is normal for this category)
- ◆ Dated c.1920–1929 per prior collector's documentation
- ◆ 20 inches tall; clothing is later replacement (non-original) dress with lace trim and ribbon rosette
- ◆ Warm, undisturbed patina; age-consistent wear consistent with gentle use

COLLECTOR NOTES

Attribution is stylistic, as is inherent to this category: hand-carved folk dolls were made by anonymous artisans and carry no factory marks — Mabel is unmarked, which is entirely consistent with the tradition. The construction (carved wood shoulder plate, string-tied neck, straw-stuffed cloth body, carved limbs) matches documented American folk-art dolls of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and the carved-hair technique indicates a skilled maker. The c.1920–1929 dating derives from the prior collector's documentation; the hairstyle and painting style suggest the maker worked from the earlier parian-doll ideal. Replacement clothing noted honestly and does not materially affect value. Value reflects recent comparable sales of American carved wood folk-art dolls, adjusted for size, carving quality, and condition.

Sandy Wade

Proprietor, Mom's Joy Room

This certificate accompanies the item at time of sale and reflects research conducted at the time of cataloguing.