Carpenter Museum – 2023 Workshop Series

Corn Husk Dolls Take-Home

Historical Background

Did you know? In early New England, children like you made and played with corn husk dolls.



What are corn husks and where do they come from? Corn husks are the long outer leaves that cover and protect an ear of corn as it grows. These "ears" of corn grow on long upright stalks. In late summer and fall, farmers harvest these ears so that we can buy and eat corn on the cob, cornmeal, popcorn, and many other corn-based foods, at the grocery store.

Why were dolls made out of corn? When European settlers or colonists came to New England, travel between Europe and the Americas was very difficult, slow, and expensive. This means that the settlers could not easily order things like food, toys, and dolls. If a child wanted a doll to play with, they had to make their own out of materials found in their local environment.



Because corn was grown in many places, and corn husks were easy to fold, bend, and tie, even children with little money and no access to a market or store, could have a corn husk doll to play with. The children of European settlers in New England probably learned how to make these dolls by watching how their Native American neighbors used corn.

Corn in Early New England: The Native Americans who lived in the region that we now know as Rehoboth are called the Pokanoket and many of their descendants still live here today. Planting and harvesting corn was a very important part of their lives, just as it became a very important part of the European colonists' lives.

In 1643, when the English first settled in Rehoboth, they might have seen the Pokanoket save the corn husks from their



harvested corn and let them dry. They wove these husks into mats and baskets. They also used the husks to make dolls. The dolls were made right here in Rehoboth and all of New England and further!

You will see that most of the dolls that we have on display today have faces drawn on. Throughout history, however, most corn husk dolls did not have faces. There is a story about this that is told by different groups of Native Americans, such as the Oneida, who are some of the earliest inhabitants of the area we know today as New York.



The Oneida Legend: "Many Native American people associated corn with the Corn Spirit, which is one of the "three sisters" or "sustainers of life" – corn, beans, and squash. If you ever look at a traditional corn husk doll, you'll notice they don't have faces!

An Oneida tribe legend explains why.

The Corn Spirit was useful to her people, helping make mats, baskets, and more. One day the Corn Spirit asked the Great Spirit if she could provide something different for her people. With the Great Spirit's permission, she made corn husk dolls to bring joy to children throughout the land.

However, there was one corn husk doll that thought she was the most beautiful. One day the doll looked into a pool of water and admired how beautiful it was. Then doll began spending less time with the children and more time staring at herself.

The Great Spirit was angry at her vanity and gave her a warning. When the doll didn't stop, the Great Spirit punished her by taking away her face so that she could neither look at herself nor converse with the children ever again! These faceless dolls continue to serve as a reminder that we need to get along with one another and help each other" (adapted from "Home School in the Woods" website).

(Vanity-excessive pride in or admiration of one's own appearance or achievements)