



# Oneida Cultural Heritage Department

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## Dolls! Dolls! Dolls! Dolls!

### HISTORY OF DOLLS

What is a doll? According to the American Heritage Dictionary, it is “a child’s toy representing human being.” However, we will never know exactly when these figures were first created specifically as a toy or plaything. According to archaeologists, the earliest representations of the human form were used as religious icons for the people who made and possessed them. The earliest “doll” figures date back to B.C.E. (Before the Common Era) and may have been used as fertility symbols.

Despite the religious role, there is historical proof that young girls played with dolls. Even though few dolls made prior to the 1700’s have survived, our knowledge of dolls has been recorded in art and literature. Paintings and prints dating back to the Middle Ages depict children playing with dolls.

### THE CORNHUSK TRADITION

The importance of corn as a staple crop as well as a spiritual force has been fully documented.

According to Iroquois creation stories, corn was a gift given to us by Shukwaya>tsu, Our Creator. It is referred to as one of the Three Sisters, the other sisters being beans and squash. Corn is thought to be basically female in nature. Historically, it was the Iroquois women who planted and tended the corn, harvested and prepared the corn, and made the corn into the various foods, medicines, and crafts.

The corn was stored by peeling the husks back, exposing the ears and braiding the husks to form long strands which were hung to

dry. As the corn was used during the winter months, the remaining husks were not thrown out but instead used in making rugs and other items including dolls, mats, bottles, moccasins, baskets, and masks.

### CORNHUSK DOLLS

Of all the cornhusk forms, the dolls are clearly the most popular. Cornhusk masks and baskets were used in certain religious ceremonies. It is believed that the cornhusk dolls also had a religious use in some of the medicine societies. Example of the dolls have been discovered as early as 1724 as a part of a medicine bundle used to carry away illness.

Making cornhusk dolls is an art form that was perfected long before the arrival of Columbus and has been passed down from generation to generation as a part of our Iroquoian life are depicted through the making of the dolls.

In an interview with Gail General and Pam Brown, Akwesasne Mohawk doll makers (Northeast Indian Quarterly Winter 1990), they expressed their feelings on doll making. “The art of cornhusk doll-making links us to our past, through the corn, as part of the Three Sisters, our life staples.”

The cornhusks are fashioned into dolls that depict Iroquoian music, dance, traditional crafts, storytelling, and the lives of our ancestors.

The styles of cornhusk dolls run a gamut from simple stick figures to complex sculptural forms depicting authentic detail of Iroquois dress from various periods in history. However, one characteristic of all Iroquois cornhusk dolls

remains a constant—they are made without faces.

There are varying stories of why these beautiful dolls are made faceless. One story is that the Creator and the child together should determine the “personality” of the doll.

Another story is that if a face is painted on the doll, the child will begin to identify too closely with the doll’s personality and a pretty face may cause conceit or self-pride.

Yet another is that by making a doll and giving it a face, you are giving it a spirit or soul and by selling it, it would be like selling your own child.

Whatever the story, each contains an underlying theme that teaches a lesson to the young people. Here is an example of one such story.

### **WHY THE CORNHUSK DOLL HAS NO FACE**

At one time the cornhusk doll had a very beautiful face. The Creator placed her on earth to be a companion to the children. Her task was to play with and entertain the little children.

One day the cornhusk doll saw her reflection in a pool of water and became so infatuated with her beauty that she forgot her appointed task—the children. She spent most of her time staring at her reflection in the calm pools of water.

The children began misbehaving and getting into trouble. When the Creator asked them why, the children complained that the cornhusk doll was too busy and didn’t have time to play with them anymore. The Creator became so disturbed by her vanity that he took away her face and spirit to teach her a lesson in humility.

### **TRADITIONAL CORNHUSK DOLLS**

The bodies of traditional cornhusk dolls are made entirely of cornhusks and can be grouped into three types based on the clothing. They are dressed in clothing made of cornhusk, clothing made of fabric and beads, or clothing made of leather.

The style and type of material used for the clothing is an indicator of the dolls age, however, there is a tendency for the artist to depict their version of an “historic” outfit rather

than a current style of dress. The hair of the doll is usually made of corn silk, yarn, horse hair and in some cases, human hair.

Interesting Oneida, Wisconsin, traditions during the late 1800’s are the dolls with fingers, most likely made by church guild women.

### **STAND-UP CORNHUSK DOLLS**

The stand-up dolls are a recent adaptation of the traditional dolls. The bodies are made entirely of cornhusk but the lower body is made by layering concentric circles of husk, creating a cone-like base enabling them to stand alone. Most have yarn hair and arms that are either braided or bound. The remainder of the doll’s clothing is embellished with fabric and beads or leather. By the nature of their construction, they are usually female.

### **CHARACTER DOLLS**

Another recent adaptation of the cornhusk doll is the “character” or “action” doll which depicts an activity such as hunter, dancer or lacrosse player. The earlier versions of this type of doll were made by holding the doll in position with string while the arms and legs were damp. When the body dried, the string was removed and the body retained its position.

The more recent versions are constructed around a wire core that can be bent into a desired posture. The arms and legs are always bound, never braided as with the traditional dolls and they are always attached to a base or fastened to a diorama floor. Miniature rattles, weapons, musical instruments and decorations such as feathers and fur usually accompany these dolls.

### **APPLEHEAD DOLLS**

A very rare style of cornhusk doll is the apple head. Very few of this type of doll have been discovered that are more than a few years old.

An apple is peeled and sculpted with facial features then allowed to dry. The shrunken dried head is attached to a cornhusk body, either as a head or a mask, and then dressed in miniature cloth or leather clothing.

Why these dolls have faces and other types of cornhusk dolls do not is unclear. Little is known about their origin. One explanation is that they are not true cornhusk dolls.

### **OTHER DOLLS**

#### **Contemporary Handmade Dolls**

Cornhusk dolls clearly dominate the “traditional” type Iroquois doll market but more recently various other styles of dolls have appeared using materials other than cornhusks.

A limited number of dolls have been discovered made of birch bark, wood, leather, and fabric. As with the cornhusk dolls, the attire reflects the artist’s idea of “traditional” clothing.

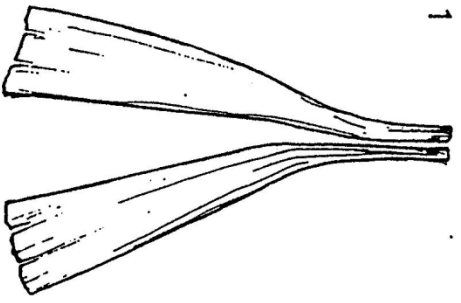
Most doll makers of today take great pains to research clothing styles so their creations will have an authentic look. As with cornhusk dolls, these dolls also can be very simple or very complex with elaborate detail in the application of trim.

### **DRESSED DOLLS**

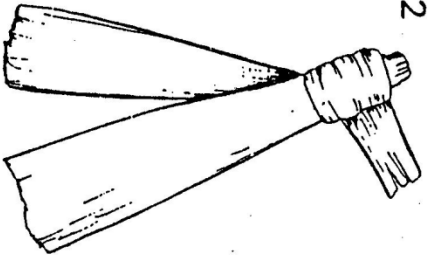
Increasingly more popular are the “dressed” dolls. The doll bodies are made of fabric, rubber or hard plastic and are readily available at discount stores or craft stores. Some doll parts are also available in fine porcelain. The dolls are then dressed in handmade outfits of leather or fabric.



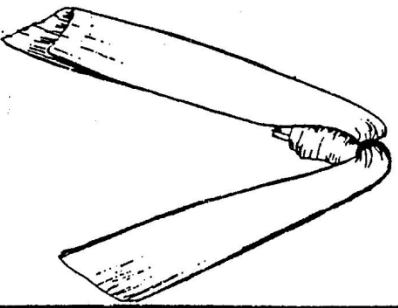
# How to Make . Cornhusk Doll



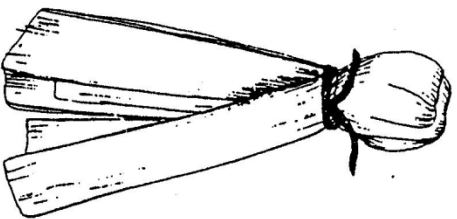
1  
Moisten cornhusks.  
Hold the ends of  
2 cornhusks together.



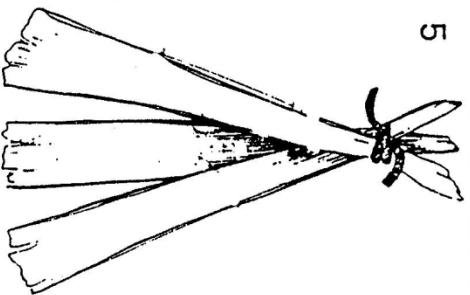
2  
Wrap another cornhusk  
around the ends to hold  
them together. Make a  
big lump when you do it.



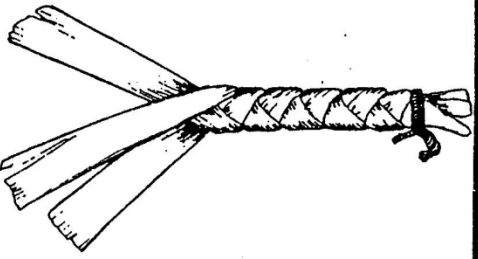
3  
Fold the husks down over  
the lump.



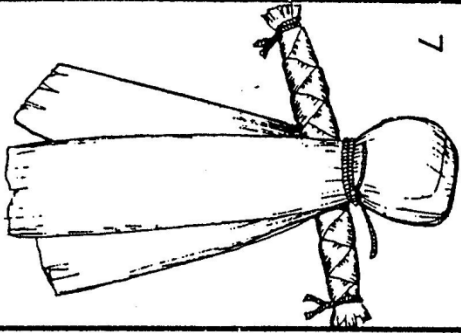
4  
Tie the folds with a piece of  
yarn. This makes the doll's  
head.



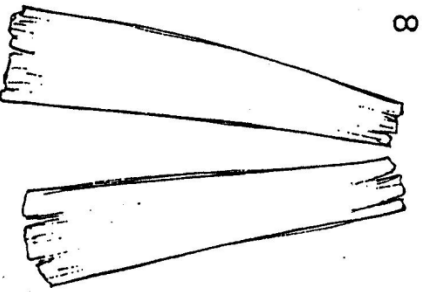
5  
Split a cornhusk into 3 parts.  
Tie the strips together at one  
end.



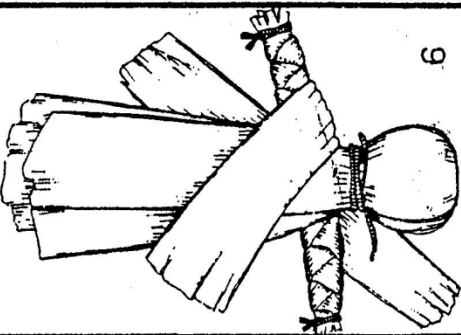
6  
Braid the 3 strips  
together. Tie the other end  
to make the hands and arms.



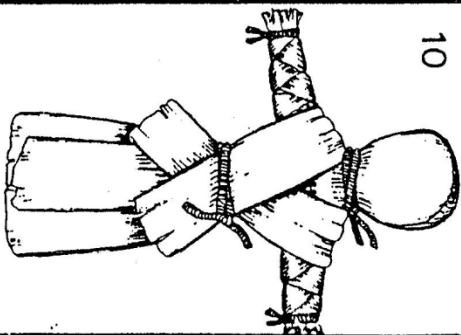
7  
Position the arms between  
the first two husks and  
under the head.



8  
Split one more husk into  
2 parts.



9  
Fold 1 part over each  
shoulder.



10  
Tie with yarn at the waist.  
This makes a belt for your  
doll's shirt.