



# ROSE O'NEILL & THE KEWPIE COLLECTION

## The Enchanted Realm Gallery

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Tucson, Arizona

Valentine's Day is a lovely tradition, no longer designated simply for lovers but for good friends and treasured relationships from all walks of life. Receiving some small, unexpected token of warmth brightens hearts and brings a little cheer to us all. Unfortunately, the holiday brings in its wake a tidal wave of confections and amorous offerings to shop shelves, drowning consumers in a flood of sentimental drivel. Cheaply-made stuffed bears holding sequined hearts stare out at us with unblinking eyes, a dismal army of red and pink. This deluge of mass-produced fluff could make any of us feel a bit worn out and cynical. How refreshing it is then, to look at the cherubic work of Rose O'Neill, whose Kewpies, though mass-produced, continue to illicit a sense of nostalgia and sweetness more than 100 years since their first appearance. How can such simple figures, with their roly-poly bodies, starfish hands and turnip-shaped heads, remain iconic darlings recognizable worldwide after more than a century? It can be argued that the enduring love for Kewpies is carried along by the legacy of Rose O'Neill, herself: an artist, writer and sculptor who threw herself entirely into all that she created. O'Neill loved her Kewpies and those who loved them, inviting viewers into her infectious world of merriment and well-intended mischief – not as a bystander but as a citizen, in a land that taught the value of friendship and kindness.



Kewpie Pin Tray. Germany, circa 1917. Acquired by Pat Arnell in 1988. Photo by Emily Wolverton.

playful goodwill. Her whirlwind of success brought her unprecedented fame and fortune, and she liberally shared her prosperity with friends and family. In her book, *With Kewpish Love: Memorabilia & Collectibles of Rose O'Neill*, Florence Theriault writes that O'Neill "...had an open-door policy that excluded no friend...friends would come to visit for a day and stay for a year. She was dreamy, poetic, and ethereal, and it was a persona that she cherished."<sup>1</sup> She regularly dressed in long flowing robes, which she called her "aura," exuding a larger-than-life presence to those who met her.<sup>2</sup> Although she did not create her beloved Kewpies until 1909 at the age of 35, O'Neill was already a well-known author and popular illustrator at a time when men dominated literary circles, working professionally since the age of 19. Her illustrations were rich with texture and life, and her "serious art," which she referred to



The Museum collection features many "Kewpie Huggers." The most popular "Huggers" were either not clothed (left), or dressed as a bride and groom (right). Both sets of Huggers are from Germany, circa 1910 and circa 1912, respectively. Photos by Emily Wolverton.

By all accounts, Rose O'Neill was a wonderful woman. Stories of her compassion and generosity are abundant, giving a backbone of truth to her imaginary Kewpies and their lifestyle of



Collectible plate featuring Careful of His Voice Kewpie (left) and Always Wears His Overshoes Kewpie (right). The Museum has two matching plates. Germany, circa 1915. Photo by Emily Wolverton.

collectively as her Sweet Monsters, is an extraordinary collection, shockingly apart from her simple and endearing Kewpies.<sup>3</sup> While she worked tirelessly to keep up with demand for her profitable Kewpies, she made time whenever possible to work on these more personal, deeper artworks.

The name “Kewpie” is a word derived from Cupid. Kewpies are similar to Cupid, with their plump, infantile bodies and little wings, but their similarities end there. Cupid is armed with bow and arrow to pierce the heart with love, but Kewpies exist only to be merry and helpful. O’Neill put it quite simply, noting that “Cupid gets you into trouble and the Kewpies get you out.” O’Neill fashioned a world just for her Kewpies, which she appropriately dubbed Kewpieville. The residents of this town include Chief Wag, the town leader, always shown wearing a flag with a ‘K’ protruding from his topknot; the Kewpie Gardener, who not only planted flowers but also kept the town clean, shown holding rakes or hoes and wearing a wide-brimmed straw hat; Kewpie Carpenter, the town’s handyman, always wearing his tool belt and brandishing his trusty hammer; and Kewpie Cook, with his little apron, whose duty was to keep tummies full. Over time, more Kewpies came about, including Blunderboo, always clumsy and falling over, the Kewpie Lovers (Katy O’Kewp and Johnny McKewp), Katy’s grumpy Uncle Hobgoblin (who regularly kept Katy in jail to keep her away from Johnny), and Kewpidoodle Dog. Some Kewpies had elaborate names, such as Careful of His Complexion, who appears in a sunbonnet, Careful of His Voice, who wears headscarves, and Always Wears His Overshoes who, unsurprisingly, always has shoes on. There were humans



The Museum houses a display of five early 20th Century Kewpie postcards, including the two pictured (above). Postcards featuring Kewpie designs were extremely popular, released by companies such as Campbell Cards and Edward Gross Co. Photos by Emily Wolverton.

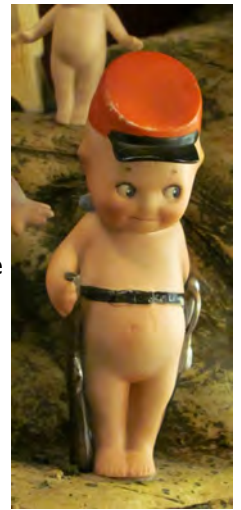


The Museum collection houses ten tobacco premium Kewpie Flannels, circa 1914. The flannel pictured (above) features Chief Wag jumping over Kewpie Cook. Flannels such as these would be used to make doll quilts for children. Photo by Emily Wolverton.

that found their way into Kewpie adventures, including Dotty Darling and her sister Nan, but the most famous of all is Scootles, otherwise known as the Baby Tourist, who lived in Kewpieville and “scooted” about causing jolly mishaps. Many more Kewpie characters can be found in the delightful *Kewpie Kutouts*, a paper doll series, most all of which were intended to instruct children on how to be helpful or kind to others, or even more specific lessons. For example, Life Preserver Kewp taught water safety, whilst swimming about with the mermaid Kewpies, the Merkewps. If you look carefully, you can find a tiny Merkewp in our collection.

O’Neill’s Kewpies were at a fever-pitch of popularity by 1914, when war broke out across Europe. Her bisque Kewpies were being created in Germany at the time, and shipments were cut off – and in some cases, destroyed – making these early German pieces highly collectible.<sup>4</sup> The presence of war affected O’Neill’s Kewpies in other ways, as well: Kewpie Soldiers are to be found dressed in uniforms from a number of countries in a pageant of international camaraderie. These soldiers did not fight each other, but rather were intended to fight unhappiness and the dreariness of War itself. Truly, O’Neill’s only political passion was for women’s right to vote: she marched for woman’s suffrage and illustrated several protest pieces.<sup>5</sup>

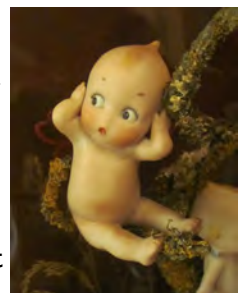
The range of Kewpie memorabilia is astonishing. Aside from the bisque dolls, which came in a startling variety of sizes and poses, you could find the characters as salt and pepper shakers, bars of soap, on boxes of Jell-O or Kellogg’s Corn Flakes, on handkerchiefs, cups and plates, trinket boxes, hat pins, coloring books, stuffed dolls, postcards, and even more souvenirs – a seemingly endless Kewpie parade that has established a passionate international collector



Kewpie as Civil War Soldier. Germany, circa 1915. O’Neill’s Kewpie soldiers wore uniforms from all over the world and served to fight unhappiness. Photo by Emily Wolverton.



Kewpie with Candy Container Sack, circa 1915. Variations of this piece exist with brass plates on the base engraved with various expressions or terms of endearment. Photo by Emily Wolverton.



Blunderboo Kewpie with his arms held to his head. Germany, circa 1915. Photo by Emily Wolverton.

base. The Mini Time Machine Museum's *Kewpie Collection* is quite diverse, featuring an incredibly beautiful assortment of very early German bisque dolls, as well as blue and green Jasperware pieces, porcelain dishes, postcards and flannel squares. Easily the most prominent and eye-catching piece, our *Kewpie Stained Glass Window*, acquired at auction in the mid 1980s, provides a handsome background for our display, glowing brightly in our Enchanted Realm Gallery.

Rose O'Neill's Kewpies inspired tremendous happiness, and her success as a businesswoman was an inspiration to young girls, everywhere. She matched her newfound fortune with charitable acts and bigheartedness, proving that monetary success need not produce misers. She continued to generate her own works of literature and art, never relinquishing her inner spark in exchange for monetary triumph. The fact that her most lasting achievement can be found in these little sprite-like creatures seems appropriate – an enduring tribute to her imagination, compassion, and gentle manner... with a healthy dash of mischief.

Emily Wolverton  
The Mini Time Machine  
Museum of Miniatures

1 Theriault, Florence. *With Kewpish Love: Memorabilia & Collectibles of Rose O'Neill*. Gold Horse Publishing, 2004. P. 6.

2 Ibid.

3 "I am in love with magic and monsters, and the drama of form emerging from the formless". –Rose O'Neill. To see some of Rose O'Neill's incredible Sweet Monsters, visit the Bonniebrook Gallery and Rose O'Neill Museum

[www.roseoneill.org](http://www.roseoneill.org)

4 British forces torpedoed an entire shipment of Kewpies bound for America, on its way through the English Channel.

5 Theriault, Florence. *With Kewpish Love: Memorabilia & Collectibles of Rose O'Neill*. Gold Horse Publishing, 2004. P. 7.



Stained Glass Window featuring the Kewpies of Kewpieville and Kewpidoodle Dog in the center. Pat Arnell acquired this window at auction in pieces and later restored it. Photo by Emily Wolverton.



Green Jasperware Kewpie Sugar and Creamer set (above) and Blue Jasperware Clock (detail, below). Bisque, Germany, circa 1910. Both pieces show the popular Kewpies from Kewpieville: Kewpie Cook (shown in his apron), Kewpie Carpenter (with his tool belt and hammer), and the Always Wears his Overshoes Kewpie who seems about to fall over in both scenes. Photos by Emily Wolverton.



Above, Kewpie Farmer with Art Nouveau Style Vase. Germany, circa 1912.

Variations of this Kewpie vase include Kewpie Farmer holding different tools and Kewpie Soldier holding rifle.

Below, extremely rare Kewpie Riding a Mountain Goat. Germany, circa 1912. Photos by Emily Wolverton.



Porcelain Kewpie Sugar Bowl. Germany, circa 1912. The exterior features images of Chief Wag (left) and Careful of His Voice (right). Photos by Emily Wolverton.



This rare 12" original Kestner model of a Kewpie has a bisque socket-head with large, brown glass eyes and wooden ball-jointed toddler body. Germany, circa 1912. Photo by Emily Wolverton.