

# Bild Lilli doll

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The **Bild Lilli Doll** was a German [fashion doll](#) produced from 1955 to 1964, based on the comic-strip character Lilli. She is the predecessor of [Barbie](#).

## History

In the beginning *Lilli* was a German cartoon character, created by Reinhard Beuthien for the tabloid [Bild-Zeitung](#) in [Hamburg, Germany](#). In 1953 Bild-Zeitung decided to market a Lilli doll and contacted Max Weissbrodt from the toy company [O&M Hausser](#) in Neustadt/Coburg, Germany. Following Beuthien's drawings, Weissbrodt designed the prototype of the doll, which was on sale from 1955 to 1964, when [Mattel](#) acquired the rights to the doll and German production stopped. Until then production numbers reached 130,000. Today *Lilli* is a collector's piece as [Barbie](#) is, and commands prices up to several thousand Euros, depending on condition, packaging and clothes. <sup>[*citation needed*]</sup>

## The cartoon

Reinhard Beuthien was ordered to make a "filler" to conceal a blank space in the [Bild-Zeitung](#) of June 24, 1952. He drew a cute baby, but his boss didn't like it. So he kept the face, added a ponytail and a curvy woman's body and called his creation "Lilli". She sat in a fortune-teller's tent asking: "Can't you tell me the name and address of this rich and handsome man?" The cartoon was an immediate success so Beuthien had to draw new ones each day.

*Lilli* was post-war, sassy and ambitious and had no reservations talking about sex. As she had her own job she earned her own money as a secretary but wasn't above hanging out with rich men ("I could do without balding old men but my budget couldn't!"). The cartoon always consisted of a picture of *Lilli* talking to girlfriends, boyfriends, and her boss ("As you were angry when I was late this morning I will leave the office at five p.m. sharp!"). The quips underneath the cartoons handled topics ranging from fashion (to a policeman who told her that two-piece-swimsuits are banned: "Which piece do you want me to take off?"), politics ("Of course I'm interested in politics; no one should ignore the way some politicians dress!") and even the beauty of nature

("The sunrise is so beautiful that I always stay late at the nightclub to see it!"). The last *Lilli* cartoon appeared on January 5, 1961.

## The doll

*Lilli* was available in two sizes, 30 cm (12 inches) and 19 cm (7.5 inches). She held three patents absolutely new in doll-making: The head was not connected to the neck, but ended at the chin;<sup>[clarification needed]</sup> the hair was not rooted, but a cut-out scalp that was attached by a hidden metal screw; the legs did not sprawl open when she was sitting. The doll was made of plastic and had molded eyelashes, pale skin and a painted face with side glancing eyes, high narrow eyebrows and red lips. Her fingernails were painted red, too. She wore her hair in a ponytail with one curl kissing the forehead. Her shoes and earrings were molded on. Her limbs were attached inside by coated rubber bands. The cartoon *Lilli* was blonde, but a few of the dolls had other hair colours. Each *Lilli* doll carried a miniature [Bild-Zeitung](#) and was sold in a clear plastic tube.

In 1955 the tall dolls cost [DM](#) 12, the small [DM](#) 7.50. German office workers then had a monthly salary of approximately [DM](#) 200 to [DM](#) 300, so the doll was by no means a cheap toy. She was originally marketed to adults in bars and tobacco shops as a joke or gag gift. Many parents considered her not appropriate for children. [Ariel Levy](#) refers to her as a "sex doll" in [Female Chauvinist Pigs](#) and in interviews on the Lilli-inspired Barbie doll, [Eve Ensler](#) refers to Lilli (without elaboration) as a "sex toy".<sup>[1]</sup> A German brochure from the 1950s states that *Lilli* was "always discreet," and that her wardrobe made her "the star of every bar." Although the doll was originally not designed as a children's toy, she eventually became popular with children. [Doll houses](#), room settings, furniture, and other toy accessories to scale with the small Lilli were produced by German toy factories to cash in on her popularity amongst children and parents. Lilli and her fashions were sold as children's toys in a number of European countries, including Italy and Scandinavian states. Lilli was as high-profiled and successful as a toy as she was as an adult novelty, although outside of Germany she is mostly remembered in the latter guise.

## The wardrobe

*Lilli* came as a dressed doll—additional fashions were not sold separately.<sup>[2]</sup> Her fashions mirror the lifestyle of the 1950s: She had outfits for parties, the beach and tennis, as well as cotton dresses, pajamas and poplin suits. In her last years, her wardrobe consisted mainly of "[Dirndl](#)" dresses. *Lilli's* dresses always have patent fasteners marked "PRYM". PRYM is the leading German button manufacturer; most German doll makers used, and still use, its products.

## Imitations

The doll became so popular that she was exported to other countries, including the United States, where she was just called "Lilli". Some Lillis have been seen in original packaging dating from the 1950s for an English-speaking market labeled as "[Lilli Marlene](#)", after the famous song. Several toy companies (mainly in [Hong Kong](#)) started producing fashion dolls looking very similar to *Lilli*. These dolls are easy to distinguish because of their poor quality.

*Lilli* also inspired the production of another fashion doll of high quality that would soon outshine her: [Barbie](#), produced by [Mattel](#). [Ruth Handler](#), one of the company's founders, bought some of

the *Lilli* dolls when she was on a trip to Europe. Back home she reworked the design of the doll and renamed her [Barbie](#), who debuted at the [New York](#) toy fair on March 9, 1959. [Barbie](#) had rooted hair and her shoes and earrings were not molded — apart from that she was a look-alike of *Lilli*. [Barbie](#) celebrated 50 years of continuous production in 2009.<sup>[3]</sup>

[Louis Marx and Company](#) acquired the rights to the Lilli doll from O&M Hausser and released it in America as the *Miss Seventeen* (doll) in 1961. Marx unsuccessfully attempted to sue Mattel for patent infringement.<sup>[4]</sup>

Also in Spain, Muñecas FEJ (Guillen y Vicedo) copied the moulds of Bild Lilli and made a very similar doll, but with darker skin, white earrings and articulated waist. However, Spanish society was extremely conservative then and was not ready for such "sexy" dolls. Mothers were not buying them for their daughters and the manufacturer had to retire them from the market.

## Related characters

In 1962 Beuthien created another cartoon character called "Schwabinchen" for a Bavarian newspaper but it wasn't as successful as *Lilli* and the dolls inspired by her were of poor quality. Later he started "Gigi", who had even less success and never made it into a doll.

*Lilli* became so popular in Germany that in 1958 a movie about her was produced: *Lilli — ein Mädchen aus der Großstadt* (*Lilli — a Girl From the Big City*). The star was chosen from a contest: Young women all over Germany sent their photographs to the [Bild-Zeitung](#) hoping for a career as a movie star. The winner was the Danish actress [Ann Smyrner](#).

*Lilli* lent her name to several luxury products like scent, wine and rhinestone jewelry.<sup>[citation needed]</sup>

## Further reading

There are no books about the Lilli doll alone. Even though their whole [Barbie](#) success was based on this German original, Mattel's legal department made sure that using the name Bild Lilli as a book title or product name would infringe copyright laws. [Mattel](#) had discreetly bought up all and any patents and copyrights to Bild Lilli, while Marx Toys held some of them after the demise of this toy competitor. Unlike Barbie, Bild Lilli was produced for only eight years and never reached the importance of the American doll. By the time the creators and producers of the original Bild Lilli doll, [O&M Hausser](#), realized that Mattel had duped them into selling off their intellectual property and distribution rights for ridiculously low lump sums, Barbie had already made Mattel such a successful and influential market leader that law suits were struck down in favor of the ever-growing American toy giant. However, in several books about Barbie or the German lifestyle in the Fifties there are chapters dedicated to Bild Lilli. In the book by Knaak all dolls and wardrobes are described and shown in colour. More basic information can be found in:

- Knaak, Silke: *Deutsche Modepuppen der 50er und 60er Jahre (German fashion dolls of the Fifties and Sixties)*; 2005. No ISBN; available at [Barbies.de](#). German and English.
- Warnecke, Dieter: *Barbie im Wandel der Jahrzehnte*; Heyne 1995. [ISBN 3-453-08738-0](#). German.

- Metzger, Wolfram (Ed.): *40 Jahre Barbie-World*; Info Verlag 1998. [ISBN 3-88190-229-5](#). German.
- Lord, M.G.: *Forever Barbie: The Unauthorized Biography of a Real Doll*; Avon Books 1995. [ISBN 0-8027-7694-9](#). English.
- *Rolf Hausser's Story* (Interview in the magazine "Barbie Bazaar", February 2000). English.
- Stephanie Deutsch: *Barbie. The First 30 Years 1959–1989*. Value guide.
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