



## German Products History Series

# The Bild Lilli Doll Story



The **Bild Lilli Doll** was a German fashion doll produced from 1950 to 1964, based on the comic-strip character Lilli. She is the predecessor of Barbie.





The Bild Lilli Doll





# 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 the 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.





## 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, 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 these sizes 30 cm (12 inches) and 19 cm (7 and a half inches). She held three patents absolutely new in doll-making: The head wasn't connected to the neck but ended at the chin; the hair wasn't rooted but a cut-out scalp that was attached by a hidden metal screw; the legs didn't 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 colors. Each *Lilli* doll carried a miniature [Bild-Zeitung](#) and was sold in a clear plastic tube.

In 1955 the tall dolls cost 12 Marks, the small 7.50 Marks. German office workers then had a monthly salary of approximately 200 to 300 Marks, 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.

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, with additional fashions sold separately. Her fashions mirror the lifestyle of the Fifties: 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.





## 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.

But *Lilli* also inspired the production of another fashion doll of high quality who 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 re-named 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 lookalike of *Lilli*. Barbie celebrated 50 years of continuous production in 2009.

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.





## 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 in 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 - ein Mädchen aus der Großstadt"

[Ann Smyrner](#)

*Lilli* lent her name to several luxury products like scent, wine and rhinestone jewelry plus a flower.





## 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 color. More basic information can be found 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.

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bild\\_Lilli\\_doll](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bild_Lilli_doll)





## BILD LILLI DOLL EXAMPLES



This 7.5 inch small

Bild-Lilli sold

on eBay on Aug-17-08

for US \$1,400.00.

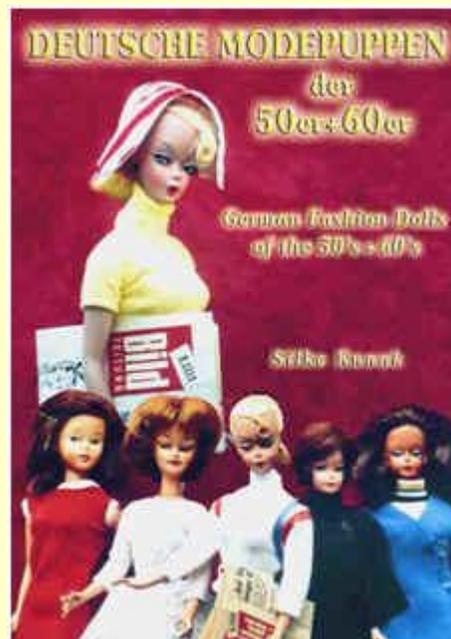
<http://bild-lilli.com/>





## The New Bild-Lilli

The German Bild newspaper recently revived the Lilli cartoon series, the new version of Lilli is called Lilly:





The *Bild* (formerly *Bild-Zeitung* was founded by [Axel Springer](#) in 1952. It mostly consisted of pictures (therefore the name BILD, German for picture). *Bild* soon became the best-selling newspaper, by a wide margin, not only in Germany, but in all of Europe, though essentially to German readers.

Through most of its history, *Bild* was based in Hamburg. *Bild* moved its headquarters to Berlin in March 2008, stating that it was an essential base of operations for a national newspaper. It is printed nationwide with 32 localized editions. Special editions are printed in some favored German holiday destinations abroad, in Spain, Italy, Greece and Turkey.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bild-Zeitung>



*Bild* newspaper vending machine in Germany





Bild Lilli

1955-1960's



Marlene Dietrich, actress

(1901 - 1992)



Doll

Reference

Lilli was originally a cartoon character created by German cartoonist Reinhard Beuthien for a "filler" on June 24, 1952 for the newspaper Bild-Zeitung in Hamburg, Germany. She became very popular as a curvy gal who knew what she wanted and went about her business to get it. She was classy, sassy, fashionable (his wife Erika helped with the fashions) and desirable, much like the Ms. Dietrich of the 1930's movies .

After a short time Reinhard decided to produce a doll of this character and it was Max Weissbrodt from the famous Hausser/Elastolin company in Neustadt/Coburg, Germany who created and produced a doll to his satisfaction.

On August 12, 1955 Lilli was first sold in Germany, usually found in smoke shops and a few toy stores. Later they were exported to several countries, even the USA (these have a doll stand with only "Lilli" on them, the regular stand says "Bild Lilli").

Lilli's original stand is just like "younger-cousin" Barbie's it's round and the dolls foot has holes that fit on to a prong of metal. She was accompanied by a miniature copy of the Hamburg newspaper Bild-Zeitung and the cartoon continued to run in the real journal every Sunday.



Her entire packaging was designed by Mrs. E. Martha Maar (mother-in-law to the owner of the Hausser company and owner of a doll company 3 M Dolls), it consisted of a clear oval tube with the doll on a Lilli round stand as the bottom and

a lid. The doll is **unmarked**. Her stand had her name on it.

She was produced in 7 1/2 -8" and 11 1/2", her shoes and earrings are molded on, she has a painted face with side glancing eyes with white irises, high v-like narrow eyebrows, red cupid bow lips and fingernails. She is all plastic with limbs attached inside by coated rubber bands. Her hair is a cut-out scalp that is attached by a hidden metal screw that was not meant to be played with and is in split curl bangs and a ponytail (Note: this was intended for adult males as a party or gag gift) usually found in Blonde. She came as a dressed doll, with additional fashions available separately. Her fashions have push together snaps usually marked on the inside snap with "**PRMY**". She was also cloned and copied by other doll makers .

This is the doll that Ruth Handler found while shopping in Europe in 1956, and was exactly what she had been thinking of producing. She bought three dolls; gave one to daughter Barbie and the others to her designers at Mattel. The rest is pretty well known history. Barbie debuted at the New York toy fair on March 9, 1959. Mattel acquired the rights to Lilli in 1964, thus her production ceased.

The Lilli head molds however were sold to a British Hong Kong firm named Dura-Fam Ltd. which produced the same 11 1/2" doll which is found marked "Hong Kong". Another set of molds were leased to Chang-Pi Su Co. who reduced them to 7 1/2 - 8" and released them as "Cherie". More blank molds went to Fab-LU (Luften, Ltd.) who sold a doll called Babs, Marx used them too and had a doll called Bonnie, a larger 15" doll called Miss Seventeen "A Beauty Queen" and a 7"

doll named Miss Marlene. Sak Industries, Inc. used the mold and sold a doll named Babbie, and an Australian firm Haro-Mate Ltd. sold the dolls marked "Hong Kong" and carried the registration number of "British Patent #804566 and U.S. patent #2925684. Most of these dolls come from the 1960's.

[http://dollreference.com/bild\\_lilli.html](http://dollreference.com/bild_lilli.html)

