

Styling Santa

... or fashioning Father Christmas. **Ian Price** takes a nostalgic look at some vintage styles for this icon of the holiday season.



Peggy Nisbet was the doyenne of British doll design from the 1950s until her death on 9th October 1995, aged 86. She meticulously researched every doll – each costume and character was designed with great accuracy; there was wide variety – from Henry VIII and his six wives, to Tutankhamen, and the doorman at Harrods. Her many modes of Santa were based on traditional outfits from around the world. The Santa Claus in America doll leans heavily on the image of Santa originally developed by Coca Cola in 1931 using the illustrations of Haddon Sundblom.

Peggy regularly attended collectors' conventions in America to promote her dolls. Collectors worldwide would eagerly wait to see the new series of dolls produced by the House of Nisbet, whether in national or historical costumes, or dressed as famous historical figures. At its height, the company was the second largest doll manufacturer in Britain.

An especially popular line, still highly sought after by modern collectors, is the *Legends of Christmas* series. The Nisbet catalog suggests that these dolls were all issued between January 1983 and January 1986. In 1983, the selling price was £11.95 (about \$19), but by 1986, which was their last mention in the catalogs, they were selling for £15.95 (about \$23.) So they were never cheap!

The House of Nisbet intended to introduce at least one

new doll in the series each year and to withdraw a similar number, to maintain the exclusivity of the dolls. There was also a prototype, never manufactured, of the Ghost of Christmas Present from a series planned for Dickens' novel *A Christmas Carol*.

Peggy Nisbet achieved a whole array of looks for her dolls with a relatively small number of head and body types. For the *Legends of Christmas* dolls: Santa Claus in America; Father Christmas in England; St. Nicholas in Europe; and Kris Kringle all share the corpulent body shape of King Henry VIII, and Winston Churchill, (along with all the other more rotund male Nisbet dolls). Good King Wenceslas and Hote Iosho used the standard body mold used for Prince Albert and the Circus Ringmaster. The Christkindl doll used the standard 'historical' body mold.

With many thanks to Christine and David Poulten for all of their photographs and research. Please visit their highly informative website, peggy-nisbet-dolls.co.uk to find out more about the whole Nisbet collection of dolls

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Below (left to right) from the *Legends of Christmas* series: St. Nicholas in Europe; Kris Kringle; Santa Claus in America; Good King Wenceslas; Father Christmas in England; Hote Iosho (Japanese Santa).

Top: Christkindl, Christmas angel doll.

