

Two Different Worlds by Florence Theriault



Dolls sold by the prestige Paris doll shop Au Nain Bleu are notable for luxury costumes and accessories. These date from about 1885-1915.



A group of Alabama Babies show variation in size and painting techniques.

At the end of the 19th century the little world of dolls was changing. The emerging strength of the German doll industry had set prosperous French doll firms back on their heels. And in America, a budding and very small cottage doll industry was about to unfold.

Two doll firms, one French, one American, compared side-by-side during this time period illustrate the different and yet similar ways each met the challenge to survive and succeed. One was the near-century-old Paris doll shop of Au Nain Bleu, the other was the tiny doll manufactory of Ella Smith in Roanoke, Alabama. Two different worlds, yet one.

Au Nain Bleu of Paris, founded in 1836, was owned by the Chauviere family until 1910. Its reputation was for deluxe dolls presented in exquisite costumes that were

designed and created in their own custom workshops. It was said that during the 1860 era the entire court of Napoleon III ordered their children's dolls and playthings from there. At the end of the 19th century the store had maintained its fine reputation and prominence. It was sophisticated, elegant, just a tad snobby, and absolutely de rigueur if you considered yourself a member or wanna-be member of chic society. The dolls they presented were show-girls, designed for gentle and restricted play by proper young ladies.

The history of Au Nain Bleu has been well documented in an authorized study by Francois Theimer, which draws upon actual material in the shop archives. Throughout the 19th century, the dolls of famous French firms such as Bru and Steiner appeared on their shelves. Customer service, custom



From the original archives of Au Nain Bleu is this perfect little bebe with Au Nain Bleu paper label on her torso, and silk label inside her original silk dress.



Two classic era Ella Smith Alabama Baby dolls, with characteristic head stitching and molded features. Yet each has a distinctive personality based upon the larger or smaller painting of eyes and lips, and detail of painted curls.

creations, and well-developed marketing skills were standard for the store. Not only were the style and presentation of its costumes instantly recognizable, but each doll leaving the store would bear a bounty of store labels: paper stickers on bodies and shoes, and fine silk labels sewn into the costumes. The vitrines and store display windows were fabulous concoctions of childhood fantasies. On one occasion the store featured an entire display of child-sized costumes based upon the then popular French operetta, "La Fille du Tambour Major". Au Nain Bleu produced fabulous colorful posters advertising their Etrennes offerings, and their delivery carts and trucks, beautifully lettered with the store name, scurried all over Paris each day.

And then there was the Roanoke Doll Factory. The doll firm of Ella Smith, founded about the turn of the 19th century, was far from the fancy world of Paris. Located in the small town of Roanoke, Alabama, it was the creation of one powerhouse and creative woman, Ella Gantt Smith, an art teacher at the local Normal School. Her surroundings were simple; she lived in a small white wood-frame home and her "factory" was a woodshed built in her backyard by husband Bud. Her dolls were equally simple. They were mold-pressed, hand-stitched and oil-painted children meant for vigorous child play. These were the popular play dolls of the robust American



The 1912 catalog issued by Au Nain Bleu was filled with lavishly costumed and fitted dolls and playthings.

child, named appropriately by their maker as "indestructible".

Life in Alabama was a bit simpler. In 1886 there lived in this small town a young school teacher named Ella Gantt (Gauntt) Smith whose curious mind and inventive hands had inspired her to create new designs ranging from paper mache toys to a support for the obese and a washable beach shoe. An informative book, "Ella Smith and Alabama Dolls Scrapbook" written by Jacque Shafer, describes her as "a bold and sometimes unconventional young lady", who

could be found striding about town, "a large raucous parrot riding on her shoulder". Sometime toward the end of the century, Ella Smith created the object for which she became famous and, briefly, prosperous. It was a doll that she named "the Alabama Indestructible Doll", formed of hard-pressed layers of plaster and stockinette cloth and having an oil-painted complexion and facial features. The doll was sturdy, washable and designed for vigorous child play. During the next two decades Ella Smith patented several designs concerning the doll. She perfected not only its construction but also its style of painting. She introduced a line of clothing for the doll, not unexpected for a woman well-known for her fine needlework.

Like Au Nain Bleu in Paris, Ella Smith had a good sense of marketing. Each of her dolls was stamped with her patent award. In 1904 she presented her dolls at the St. Louis World's Fair, winning a blue ribbon according to her



The 1913 catalog issued by Ella Smith featured in Alabama Indestructible Doll in numerous styles and sizes. The wigged dolls featured painted hair under the wigs.



Character dolls in folklore costumes were among the dolls offered by the prestigious Au Nain Bleu, as shown by this superbly preserved model in its original box.



*One fabulous window display at Au Nain Bleu about 1912 featured child-size costumes from the then-popular operetta, *La Fille de Tambour Rouge*. These costumes were preserved in the archives of the store until it closed in 2006.*

catalog. At its peak, the Smith factory was said to have produced over 8000 dolls in a year, although this is not documented.

In a curious coincidence, both Au Nain Bleu and Ella Smith presented their first-ever catalogs within a year of each other, in 1912 and 1913. The Smith catalog was fairly simple. Dolls were offered in three levels of costume: undressed (actually with a chemise), "plain dressed" or "extra fancy dress". There were various model numbers which seem to correspond to variations of hair (fluffy

mohair or ringlet curled human hair wig, or painted hair) and costuming. And there were sizes ranging from 0 to 4. In another catalog, published just a few years later, she claimed to be producing seven different sizes from 12"-27", and 27 different styles. Customers were encouraged to personalize their dolls; they could specify painted shoes or bare feet, and blue or brown eyes. Wigs were available in mohair or ringlet curls. Extra shoes and socks could be ordered. A repair service was available and offered repainting or replacement of faces, hands and feet.



The variations in painting techniques of Alabama Babies are evident in these dolls, similarly sized, one with blue and one with brown eyes. There is detail not only in the style of curl painting, but also in the shading.



The presentation of dolls for Au Nain Bleu was French in every way from the deluxe fabrics and sewing, to the labeled trunks, and silk labels inside the clothing. The doll bodies were made in France, but often, as this case, the bisque heads were made in Germany and designed to be exported to France.



The final model of the Alabama Baby, designed to appear to the "modern" child, with its modified bobbed hair style and "who, me?" expression.



An early model Alabama Baby features unusual stitching at the neckline. The facial features are closely clustered at the center of the face.



Ella Smith's so-called "mammy" doll was actually the same doll as her black child, but with differences achieved in size and costume.



An experimental model of Alabama Baby with very fat body, large splayed fingers, and over-sized stitched on ears.



Two early model Alabama Babies, probably about 1905, with very white (and original!) complexions. The dolls each bear the early patent mark, and each has very high painted boots.

And a strong plea was made for patriotism. In a foreword, the catalog begged "These dolls are made right here in Alabama. The material they are made of is raised here in the South...when you buy these dolls, you help the farmer. You help the poor widow women and orphan girls who are struggling now so hard to make a living and unless our home industries are patronized lots of poor people will go needing."

The 1912 Au Nain Bleu catalog, on the other hand, was a fantastical confection of luxury dolls and toys in all genres, with each object richly presented in a mode that proclaimed a sumptuous life style. Dolls dressing tables were laden with draped Alencon lace and fitted with hand-painted porcelain ware. Dolls were costumed in richest silks with feather and flower-bedecked bonnets. Ironically, beneath the lace and silks designed to proclaim the very Frenchness of the dolls, were often toys and dolls whose basic components were made in other parts of Europe, most specifically their arch-doll-rival-country of Germany.

It is unlikely that Au Nain Bleu and Ella Smith even knew of each other. Yet they were rivals and in one sense it was a contest not only of different dolls, but of different worlds. The Old World versus America. The market for the affluent versus the market for the common man. The establishment versus the entrepreneur. 19th century style versus the modern style of the 20th century. Fancy dolls versus the plain and simple. Two different worlds, indeed.



The gigoteur of Jules Steiner was a favorite doll at Au Nain Bleu for more than two decades. This example has labels on the doll and on the costume indicating the store's pride in the goods that it created and offered.

The doll world of Ella Smith was relatively short-lived. By the mid-1920's it was reduced to very small production numbers, and when its founder died in 1932, it ended. As for Au Nain Bleu, it prospered throughout the entire 20th century, being a landmark not only for Parisian residents, but also for world travelers that sought the rare and luxurious toy and dolls. At the end of 2006, however, that store, too finally closed its doors for ever.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

1. All of the dolls shown in this article will be sold by Theriault's in their cataloged doll auction, Two Different Worlds, March 17 at the Sheraton Buckhead near Atlanta. Catalogs may be ordered by calling 800-638-0422 or at www.theriaults.com.
2. The Alabama Babies are from the private collection of Jacques Shafer, author of *Ella Smith and Alabama Babies* and much of the information and vintage photographs featured in this article can be found in that work.
3. The dolls and costumes from Au Nain Bleu have been in the private archives of that Paris store until its closing last year after nearly a century of existence.
4. The book, *Au Nain Bleu*, by Francois Theimer is available at Dollmasters by calling 800-966-3655.