Cultural anthropologist Shifra Epstein observed that the “Israeli” dolls in Disney World’s “It’s a Small World” attraction are attired in “Orthodox” and “Hasidic” fashions set under a traditional wedding canopy. According to Epstein, such costumes reflect a radical departure from the dominant Israeli image of the secular sabra and represent misguided diaspora perceptions of Israeliness as Ashkenazi Orthodox Jewishness. Epstein theorizes that Disney’s curators struggled to represent Israel in the march of national dolls because the country had “not developed its own distinct national dress.” The recent large-scale exhibition at the Eretz Israel Museum in Tel Aviv examines the rise and ultimate decline of the costume doll industry in Israel with nearly 400 dolls made in the land of Israel from the 1920s until the 1980s. (fig. 1) While the exhibition ostensibly assumes the same interest in national identity as Epstein, it also takes a critical approach to what it sees as a politico-economic system that undermined Labor Party-era craft objects. When addressing the religious/secular and East/West divides that concern anthropologists such as Epstein, the exhibition summarily identifies ultra-religious character dolls as authentically Israeli and the sandaled and blue-shirted “sabra” dolls that have come to dominate the Israeli doll industry as idealized personas that represent a subversion of “Israeli” multiculturalism. The championing of Orthodox Ashkenazi dolls is an unexpected and refreshing perspective given the intuitive line of argument made by Epstein, but these identity divides are not really at the heart of the Eretz Israel Museum exhibition. Instead, the catalog and wall-mounted labels mourn the demise of authentic Israeli culture in the economic realities of the last three decades: “In the beginning, the dolls, which were made in Eretz Israel, gave expression to a multi-cultural viewpoint and a diverse reality from the ethnic point of view. As the years went by, diversity gradually lessened and the dolls were charged with ideological, national, and hegemonic elements, which restricted the boundaries of Israeliness. The dolls became more stereotypical, to the point that not only did they not match the complex Israeli reality, but they also ceased to express the longed-for reality.” The introductory wall label ties the decline of the craft doll industry with Israel’s current economic policies and broader global trends: “In the era of globalization, Israeli national costume dolls are produced in China, imported to Israel, and sold as souvenirs in tourist shops.” These comments seem out of place in an exhibition that showcases the important and in its time successful crafts movement. Focusing on the decline of the crafts doll market, along with the snide commentary on post-Alignment economics, distracts from the economic significance of the doll industry in the first decades of Israel’s history.

In building a visual critique on the shift from the collectivist ethos of Labor Party-era manufacturing to the market-based model, the exhibition curiously reproduces artist Friedel Stern’s caricature “The Melting Pot,” in which a variety of Israeli “types” dive into the funnel of a Suessical machine that grinds out a single hegemonic version of the sabra (the one that Epstein expected to see at Disney). A lanky boy decked out in the hat popular with kibbutznicks in the 1930s known as the kova tembel, a pair of sandals, a youth movement shirt, and shorts emerges at the other end. Stern’s cartoon, directed towards adults, is a fitting image in the sense that this doll exhibition encourages viewers to think of sabra dolls as the thin edge of the wedge prying at authentic Israeli culture. Stern, the exhibition suggests, lampooned the homogenization of Israeli life and the concomitant loss of Israeli multiculturalism. It is a strange constellation of data points in light of the exhibition’s thesis that the early doll industry of the 1950s and 1960s fell into stereotypical, hegemonic representations in the 1980s, while Stern created her image in the late 1950s. Stern’s cartoon lamented not the death of the Israeli character, but its birth. Friedel Stern borrowed her colleague Kariel Zutot’s cartoon “The Land and Its Dolls: Israeli Souvenirs and National Identity,” Eretz Israel Museum, Tel Aviv, May–September, 2011; Catalog edited by Shelly Shenhav-Keller and Haim Grossman. Tel Aviv: Eretz Israel Museum, 2011.

Doll Making and Making Money in Israel

2 A Land and Its Dolls, 23–24. The text appears both at the exhibition and in the first of two essays in the catalog. The first essay by curator Shelly Shenhav-Keller reproduces the wall labels of the exhibition.
Gardosh’s (known as Dosh) famous “Srulik” character from the daily evening paper Ma’ariv, where the child-hero came to represent the young nation along the lines of France’s Marianne or America’s Uncle Sam. Dosh’s Srulik enjoyed a significant level of celebrity from his character merchandising for cigarettes, soft drinks, Independence Day festivities, and, as demonstrated in this exhibition, for Israeli dolls. Stern, on the other hand, ceased to contribute to Ma’ariv on a regular basis after the paper hired Dosh in a full-time salaried position. Stern may even have been somewhat embittered at Dosh’s success in creating the revered Srulik, while her apolitical social satires never really got off the page. The popularization in Israel and abroad of Srulik speaks to the consumer election of a Jewish Holocaust survivor with right-wing political leanings to represent Israel (both Dosh and his character were Holocaust survivors). That Dosh’s figure succeeded both in domestic and in international tourist sales might even be interpreted as a positive cultural development in light of Epstein’s suggestion that Israel had not developed a national costume. The exhibition’s lament does not derive from any particular disapproval of Srulik; indeed the museum mounted a Dosh exhibition in 2007 and the museum’s institutional orientation is sympathetic to Dosh and his Srulik character, but from a very particular economic perspective.

The Eretz Israel Museum was founded in 1959 to preserve and educate visitors on the cultures and traditions of “Israel and its inhabitants from ancient times to the present day.” This mission statement sets the Eretz Israel Museum apart from the more universal missions of both the Israel Museum and the Tel Aviv Museum of Art. The museum also differentiates itself from other museums in Israel with...