



BERTHA CORBETT MELCHER,  
Mother of the  
Sunbonnet Babies



Minnesotans are proud to claim children's literature luminaries Wanda Gág, Maud Hart Lovelace, Laura Ingalls Wilder, Carol Ryrie Brink, Emma Brock, and Kate DiCamillo as their own. Author and illustrator Bertha Corbett Melcher usually escapes notice, although she lived and worked in Minneapolis when she launched her career. Today, her characters are best known to quilters and textile historians, even though she did not design the patterns familiar to so many. Melcher should take her place in the spotlight and be remembered along with her popular creations. As a commercial artist who found many ways to market her creations over a 30-year career, she is also a good example of female entrepreneurship in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries.



In 1900 Bertha Corbett self-published *The Sun-bonnet Babies*, starring two little girls whose names were never given and whose faces were never seen. Soon, her babies could be found in many forms: printed, embroidered, appliquéd, pyro engraved (burned into wood), and painted on



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china. Her later books were frequently reprinted, often losing her gentle colors to more garish shades. Her concept of the bonneted, faceless tots was imitated by others almost immediately, attesting to its wide appeal.

Bertha Louise Corbett was born in Denver in 1872. Her father, Waldo F., was a sign painter whose work could once be seen on many walls in Leadville, Colorado. In the 1880s the family moved to Minneapolis, where they had relatives. Bertha, her sister, Jessie, and brother, William, attended local schools. Art training became an option for Bertha when the Minneapolis Society of Fine Arts opened its school on Hennepin Avenue in 1886. She enrolled in classes in 1889, when she was 17, and attended for two years.<sup>1</sup>

Art-school students learned to draw first from engravings and then from plaster casts of antique sculpture. Later came live models and lectures on anatomy. Classes lasted for four-month terms, costing eight to twelve dollars each. Day students were mostly women; night classes attracted men. Among Corbett's fellow students were Sarah H. Folwell, whose husband, William, was president of the University of Minnesota, and Julia Walker, whose father, lumberman T. B. Walker, founded the Walker Art Center. Students who, like Corbett, went on to professional art careers included Grace McKinstry, May Roos, and Alexis Fournier.

Opportunities for an artist like Corbett could be found in advertising, magazine and book illustration, and in what might be termed "line extensions" of her creations. Developing those opportunities required mentors, and over the years she found several such guides. In 1896, for example, Corbett sought advice from poet James Whitcomb Riley. He liked her "page pictures and letter margin drawings" and praised her ability as an artist. He agreed to submit her drawings to his publisher, the Bobbs-Merrill Company, although warning her:

There's one [a proverb] that says "You have come to a goat's house for wool." By which use here in our present instance I would convey the idea that you must go to the *publishers* house—not the *artists* or the *authors*. The *latter* can *praise* you and appreciate your beautiful product

*Dr. Harris holds a Ph.D. in art history from the University of Minnesota. This article was inspired by a crib quilt with appliquéd Sunbonnet lassies made by her mother, Virginia Flanagan, and by other projects undertaken in the Children's Literature Research Collections at the University of Minnesota.*

## The Sunbonnet Babies were Corbett's ticket to success.

to the full, but only the *former* can place it in the market and before the world.<sup>2</sup>

At this time, Riley was at the height of his fame as the Hoosier Poet. His work celebrated rural America and gave thousands of children a repertoire to memorize. Not only were his poems popular but, important to Corbett, his slender volumes were illustrated, an innovation of the late 1890s.<sup>3</sup> Certainly, she would have loved to work with Riley and his publisher, but that chance did not come.

In 1897 Corbett enrolled in the Drexel Institute of Art, Science, and Industry in Philadelphia, where illustrator and author Howard Pyle was beginning his teaching career. After a year there, she returned to Minneapolis. Now 26 years old, she opened a studio on the fifth floor of the Medical Block at 608 Nicollet Avenue, sharing the space with two other young women artists.<sup>4</sup>

In this era, magazines for women and children needed illustrations for stories and advertisements, as did newspapers, which were not yet able to reproduce photographs. Women such as Pyle's student Jessie Willcox Smith were illustrating books, doing magazine covers, and creating art for advertisements. Closer to home was Corbett's contemporary, Alice Hugsy of St. Paul, who went on to a career as a commercial and fine artist. While Corbett's early work included portraiture in watercolor, oils, and ink, she was open to any of the possible commercial avenues. In the early 1900s, for example, she worked as a sketcher for the *Minneapolis Journal*, accompanying reporters on their interviews.<sup>5</sup>

The Sunbonnet Babies were Corbett's ticket to success. She had begun drawing them in about 1897. A decade after her death, Corbett's brother told a reporter that their mother had suggested that Bertha "avoid her difficulty in drawing faces by hiding them with bonnets." Bertha herself had a different explanation: An artist friend asserted that emotion could only be shown in the face, while Corbett argued that pose and gesture could do the job. She drew a child in a long dress with a simple white bonnet covering its face and hair. As time would tell, she proved her point. Responding to a complimentary copy of her book, actor Joseph Jefferson (whom



*The Medical Block on Minneapolis's Nicollet Avenue,  
site of Corbett's first studio*

Corbett had sketched for the *Minneapolis Journal*) said that there were limitations to facial expression but almost none to expression in the body. “When I turn my back, each one in the audience imagines for himself just how my face must look to accord with my actions and all are perfectly satisfied with it. Your babies do the same.”<sup>6</sup>

In Corbett's later drawings, the child usually wore an apron over her dress while she worked or played. Shoes were high-button models or patent leather Mary Janes. The style of dress and bonnet suggested what a midwestern child wore in the 1890s. The small figure, often carrying a four-leaf clover like a flag, became her Sun-bonnet Baby. (The hyphen was dropped after the first book.) That clover was the reason, she told her editor in 1902, “why all succeeding babies were healthy, happy, lucky, and wise.”<sup>7</sup>

In 1900 Corbett self-published two editions of a small book showing drawings of her babies accompanied by couplets that she wrote and had printed in her distinctive calligraphy. In one picture, for example, the two girls

stand on a box and stare into a rain barrel: “In the rain-barrel big and brown/We see our faces up-side-down.” The illustrations appeared in black and white, except in a signed, limited edition of 100 copies, in which the author hand-colored the art.<sup>8</sup> When the book was in print, she invited the public to her studio, where two other women also showed their work. A local newspaper reported:

Miss Bertha Corbett received informally in her studio in the Medical block this afternoon to introduce her “Sun-bonnet Babies.” Drawings and posters of the cunning little tots were arranged through the studio and roused considerable interest among the guests, and the books in their attractive binding of green proved enticing. . . . The guests included a large number of children who were in perfect sympathy with the babies.<sup>9</sup>

One reviewer described the book as “one of the few really original departures among picture books for the very young. It is illustrated with lively little figures in sunbonnets which conceal their faces, but so naturally frolicsome are the little people that even without the verse that is strewn through the volume its story would be easily intelligible.”<sup>10</sup>

Although trained as an artist/illustrator, or “designer,” as she once listed herself, Corbett was interested in writing. Her poem, “The Unexpected Guest,” appeared in *Good Housekeeping* magazine in 1898, but most of her work was art. Other Minnesota publications she illustrated included a book, *Birdies*, and a coloring book for the Pillsbury-Washburn Company, which featured the Sunbonnet Babies going to Egypt—along with ads for the firm. In 1901 Paul A. Schmitt, founder of Minneapolis's Schmitt Music Company, published her cover for *The Parade of the Sunbonnet Babies*, with music by Lucie E. Sterns.<sup>11</sup>

Seeking a larger audience, Corbett submitted her ideas, probably in 1901, to Edwin Osgood Grover, an editor at Chicago's Rand, McNally. He showed them to his sister, Eulalie, a former elementary school teacher who had begun a new career writing books for children. Eulalie Osgood Grover felt that the readers she had used in the primary grades were “colorless and dull.” She liked Corbett's designs and suggested that they collaborate on a book.<sup>12</sup>

Eulalie Grover went on to write nine books over almost three decades about the Sunbonnet Babies and



*Title page of Corbett's first book*

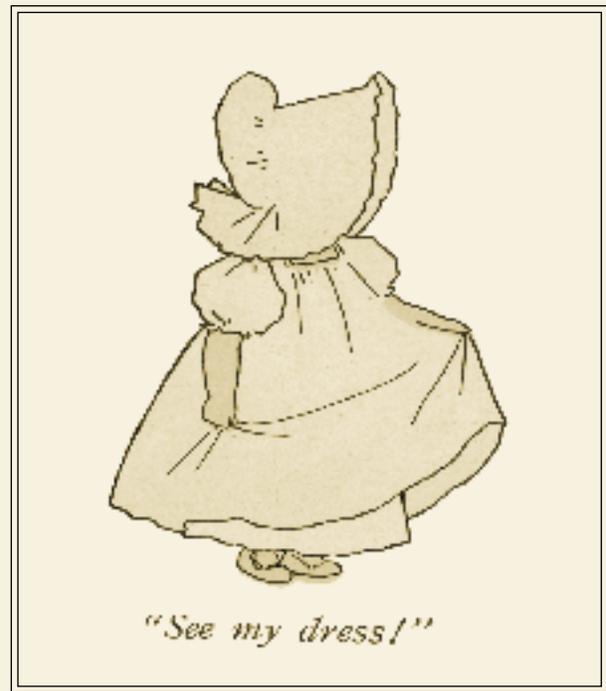
their masculine counterparts, the Overall Boys, who wore large straw hats that usually—but not always—covered their faces. Corbett illustrated all nine. Their first joint effort appeared in 1902 in trade (*The Sunbonnet Babies Book*) and school (*The Sunbonnet Babies Primer*) editions. The *Primer*, in which Grover named Corbett's creations Molly and May, proved to be the best-selling title of the many that Grover would write for schoolchildren. She predicted correctly, "Miss Corbett's delightful creations promise to take place beside the classic children of Kate Greenaway and Palmer Cox's Brownies."<sup>13</sup>

These comparisons set quite a standard. Greenaway (1846–1901) designed many books, and her art appeared on everything from trade cards to greeting cards, china, and textiles. Corbett was probably familiar with Greenaway's work and its many imitations in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Cox (1840–1924) published

the first of 13 books about his Brownies in 1887. With the books came toys, games, dolls, wallpaper, and ads for Ivory and Cashmere Bouquet soaps. As one writer noted, "All told, the Brownies and their mass audience of believers set the pace for the twentieth-century union of make-believe and merchandising."<sup>14</sup>

And indeed, like these forerunners, the babies were a hit from the very beginning. The *Chicago Daily Tribune* reported, "quaint little 'Sunbonnet Babies' appeared on Christmas cards, booklets, blotters, calendars, valentines, and all manner of dainty trifles, and were snapped up eagerly." The demand kept 15 assistants in Corbett's Minneapolis studio "constantly at work coloring the new and ever-varying 'Sunbonnet Babies' she designs."<sup>15</sup>

Critical reaction to the Corbett-Grover collaboration was also favorable. School administrators in a number of states suggested the *Primer* as a beginning reader, a role



Illustrations from Corbett and Osgood's first joint effort, *The Sunbonnet Babies Primer*, 1902

the book enjoyed for many years. Teachers liked the way the *Primer* presented a continuing story. A Minnesota guide to books for school libraries listed it as a first-grade text. Another guide noted that the lessons, written as dialogues, were “an aid to dramatic reading.” In addition, teachers could plan performances using the music included in the book—*The Sunbonnet Babies March*, *Greeting*, and *Goodbye*.<sup>16</sup>

Those who learned to read from the *Primer* long remembered its mysterious characters. The Sunbonnet Babies fit right into an era when children's books featured pairs of youngsters whose lives did not include parents, such as the Bobbsey Twins and the various Lucy Fitch Perkins twins. The *Primer* was used in varied Minnesota settings, rural and urban, into the 1920s. Valeria Lind Fredell, who entered first grade at the Lakeside Community School in Chisago City in 1921, learned to read from the *Sunbonnet Babies Primer*. In an account of her education in a one-room school in Sibley Township, Gloria Huffman Sinell recalled these pages, too: “After we had read out loud from our readers we practiced our spelling words [Grover allowed no more than three new words per page] and numbers and—Happy Day—got to color.” An alumna of St. Paul's Oak Hall, a private school on Holly Avenue, also remembered the *Primer* as her introduction to reading circa 1925 and still has her copy.<sup>17</sup>

Imitations soon appeared. The Reformed Church in

America, for example, distributed a book of weekly texts for missionaries working in the mountains of Kentucky. Copying Corbett's style and couplets, a one-page illustration shows two pairs of babies reading. A short verse set below proclaims: “The Sunbonnet Babies—God loves them, I know/Loves babies and bonnets of gay calico!/ How nice it will be when they go to our school/To sing and to read and to learn things by rule.”<sup>18</sup>

While Grover concentrated on prose and word lists, using her travels abroad to inspire geography lessons, Corbett expanded her concept to include art activities. Although their first collaboration had done extremely well, there is no information on whether the series was lucrative for Corbett. She was an illustrator, probably hired for each job. In 1908, clearly unhappy with the arrangement, she wrote editor Edwin Grover, asking for either a flat fee of \$2,500 per book or a 10 percent per-copy royalty. She pointed out, “The pictures being the cause and keynote of the book, if it sells, as it undoubtedly will, I feel this is right.” She also did not like the way her name appeared on the title page (of an unspecified book): “It will give a false impression to the public . . . [and] cause them to think I gave all the story to you, when it is only your derivation from the jingle in my first little book—which runs:

The Sunbonnet Babies lived, you know,  
In this little ink bottle round and low,  
But I helped them out  
By the aid of a pen  
So you might see, all thro the book  
The things they did  
And the way they look.<sup>19</sup>

The outcome of Corbett's financial request is not known. By then, however, she was supplementing her income with other versions of her popular babies: art cards, coloring books, calendars, postcards, and prints. One marketing scheme involved her watercolor *The Minuet*, which showed four elegantly dressed Sunbonnet Babies dancing. A 1903 advertisement in *The Delineator*, a national women's fashion magazine, offered prints of this painting along with a set of aluminum minuet skirt and waist holders (to hook the garments together) for 50 cents. Dissatisfied customers could return the holders for a full refund but keep the print as a gift.<sup>20</sup>

Though Rand, McNally continued to publish the Grover-Corbett books, in 1905 the artist moved to another Chicago publisher for her new projects. Atkinson, Mentzer, and Grover printed her *Sunbonnet Baby Color Cards*, a set of 12 outlined figures to be painted or colored. The five-by-seven-inch cards depicted A Breezy Day, St. Valentine's Day, Greeting, Thanksgiving Day, The Sea Gull, The Party, The Christmas Tree, Swing High and Swing Low, Waiting for the Parade, The Mayday, The Artist, and The Snapshot. Another book by the publisher recommended that teachers use these cards to plan holiday activities for first through fourth graders.<sup>21</sup>

Atkinson, Mentzer, and Grover also published Corbett's *Sunbonnet Babies Paint-book* (1905) and *Sunbonnet Babies Calendar* (1907). For her charming *Baby Days: A Sunbonnet Record* (1910), she returned to Rand, McNally. Record books, in which mothers kept data on their children's lives, became popular at this time. Hard-cover editions like Corbett's coexisted with soft-cover pamphlets issued by flour mills, insurance companies, banks, and even breweries.<sup>22</sup>

As early as 1904, the enterprising artist had also begun producing two sets of small paintings of the Sunbonnet Babies: "The Juvenile Industries of the Week" (washing, ironing, mending, scrubbing, cleaning, and baking) and "The Humorous Series of Juvenile Adventures" (fleeing a pumpkin head, fishing from a dock, reading, bathing, an Overall Boy kissing a Sunbonnet Baby, and playing on the beach). These images were then

reproduced as postcards, prints, figurines, and even on china. The prints, sold individually or framed, as a group, were advertised frequently in Chicago newspapers. In addition, J. I. Austen Company, Corbett's postcard and print publisher, turned the paintings into a 1906 book, *The Sunbonnet Babies at Work, at Play*. The Royal Bayreuth Company of Tettau, Germany, issued its first Sunbonnet Babies china in about 1904–05, that included a tea set, candlesticks, and other pieces.<sup>23</sup>

The postcard sets were almost immediately imitated by artists working for other printers, a common practice during this golden age of postcards. Bernhardt Wall's work for the Ullman Company of New York City is probably the best-known Corbett imitation. Wall's Sunbonnet Twins wore larger white bonnets than Corbett's babies did and had bright red dresses with puffed sleeves and fitted waists. Wall prepared postcard sets for the days of the week, the months, mottoes, nursery rhymes, and the hours of the day. A 1907 book alternated his postcards with songs and exercises for each day of the week, aiming, like the Corbett-Grover *Primer*, for the school market.<sup>24</sup>

The faceless Sunbonnet Babies also appealed to artists who specialized in valentines. On these, the young ladies wore fancier dresses and bonnets trimmed with flowers, lace, and ribbons. They were usually seen gardening, playing croquet, or having tea rather than scrubbing floors or washing windows as Corbett's babies did.<sup>25</sup>

Not all of Corbett's babies were faceless, however. In 1907 *The Housekeeper*, a Minneapolis women's magazine, published a long article about Corbett. Subsequently, she drew 11 one-page layouts of paper dolls (six Sunbonnet Babies and five Overall Boys), which appeared in the publication between February 1909 and January 1911. An immediate problem for the artist was that the basic paper doll figure, dressed in its undergarments, showed its face. So, while Corbett could provide bonnets, straw hats, and clothing galore for her creations, in this series she also had to draw faces.<sup>26</sup>

By 1905 Bertha Corbett had moved to Chicago to be closer to her publishing and marketing opportunities. There, she also began giving chalk talks at hospitals, schools, and women's clubs. While drawing Sunbonnet Babies and Overall Boys, she told stories about children she knew or had met and often distributed the sketches to members of the audience. In September 1906 she returned to Minneapolis to give two performances along with Maud Pratt Crane, who whistled to piano accompaniment.<sup>27</sup>



“Scrubbing” postcard, 1904

New connections in Chicago also suggested new directions for her work. Corbett’s studio was in the Fine Arts building where composer Carrie Jacobs-Bond was also located. The two went on tour together in 1908, entertaining visitors and employees at the Fred Harvey Houses, a chain of inns along the route of the Santa Fe railroad in the Southwest. Corbett gave chalk talks while Jacobs-Bond sang and read some of her compositions. Corbett later told a reporter that their schedule included eight-to-ten engagements en route before the tour ended in California.<sup>28</sup>

Another friend Corbett made in Chicago was the cartoonist R. F. Outcault, already famous for his Yellow Kid comic strip and later for Buster Brown and his dog Tige. The cartoonist had set up the Outcault Advertising Company to license his characters to companies for advertising. Outcault supplied printer’s blocks that stores and local businesses could use to illustrate their ads. The Sunbonnet Babies Company was launched in 1906 to explore the same possibilities. Its trademark showed the two Sunbonnet Babies seated next to each other while reading a book.<sup>29</sup>

One product that both Outcault and Corbett offered was a monthly postcard with a calendar and drawing. Beneath was the message from the sponsor. Another possibility was to draw a weekly newspaper advertisement for a store. Corbett copyrighted numerous ideas for such advertisements; 74 of them appear in the Library of

The postcard sets were almost immediately imitated by artists working for other printers.

Congress’s 1906 and 1907 copyright files.<sup>30</sup> The range of her success in this venture is not known, but, beginning in 1912, the Chisago County Cooperative Store in Lindstrom, Minnesota, used Corbett’s advertisements. For 18 months, the Sunbonnet Babies emphasized the store’s clothing, shoes, and groceries in quarter-page ads in the *Chisago County Press*. In 1914, however, Outcault’s drawings replaced Corbett’s.

Perhaps following Outcault’s lead again, the entrepreneurial artist extended the reach of the Sunbonnet Babies in a comic strip syndicated to newspapers throughout the country in 1907–08.<sup>31</sup> The *Boston Globe*’s Sunday supplement carried her nine-panel strip weekly from December 8, 1907 until July 12, 1908. Corbett told friends that she wanted to elevate the tone and character of the illustrations in the Sunday comic supplements. To one reporter she said:

When I entered into this agreement I made two stipulations. One was that my sunbonnet babies shall never be guilty of being saucy to their elders, and the other was that they should never under any circumstances be

spanked! When my babies go out to play in the world I expect they will have all sorts of experiences, get into all sorts of mischief, and when they do they will have to take their medicine at the end of the drawing and sit down in a corner and be good, but they shall never be spanked.<sup>32</sup>

While Corbett continually sought commercial outlets for her work, she occasionally entered a painting in an exhibition, as well. Vacationing in California in 1908, she submitted a painting to a show in Los Angeles. George Melcher, a painter from Philadelphia, saw the exhibit and declared the Corbett entry to be its highlight. Two years later, 38-year-old Bertha Corbett went camping near Melcher's cottage on the land he had homesteaded in California's Santa Monica Mountains. The two artists met and then were married in August 1910. Their home was a ranch, Roseneath, in Topanga Canyon, north of Los Angeles.<sup>33</sup>

The Melchers had two daughters, Charlotte and Ruth. A 1917 article in *Sunset* magazine described Bertha Cor-

bett Melcher as "at present engaged in bringing up real Sunbonnet Babies," while taking a rest from her artwork. She did, however, exhibit two miniatures of daughter Charlotte painted on ivory—*A Mountain Lassie* and *My Daughter*—at the 1915 Panama-Pacific World's Fair in San Francisco. Both Melchers entered paintings in the Minnesota State Fair art exhibit that year, too. Hers was *Her Mother's Daughter*, while his were *The King Sycamore*, *Cloud Crested*, and *The Call of Spring*.<sup>34</sup>

In addition, Bertha Melcher continued to illustrate books. In 1928 she self-published *What's on the Air?* with her daughters as contributors, and that proved to be her last. After more than a quarter-century of work, severe arthritis ended her art career. Following her divorce in 1930, she moved to the Los Angeles area with her daughter Ruth.<sup>35</sup>

Bertha Corbett Melcher died in 1950 at the age of 78. At the time, she was listed in biographical directories of artists, postcard artists, and, sometimes, children's book illustrators. That reputation has faded. Today she is known to textile and quilt historians, who have anointed her the creator of Sunbonnet Sue, the "only quilt pattern invented in Minnesota"—an accolade she would have found strange.<sup>36</sup>

Sunbonnet Babies indeed have delighted quilters, although Melcher neither designed nor developed the patterns. In the 1910s her popular concept was so appealing that others created patterns, first for redwork embroidery and later for appliqué. The redwork designs, so called because they used Turkey red thread that did not fade or run, are much closer to the Corbett style. The appliqué patterns were something quite different.

Piecedwork had been the most popular type of quilting through much of American history. Appliqué, in which shaped pieces are sewn to a background rather than joined to each other, was far less common until the twentieth century. Rarer still were quilt designs using human figures.

A quilter named Marie Webster changed all that. Quilts she designed and stitched appeared in *Ladies Home Journal* in 1911–12. They were instantly popular, and many women requested information and patterns. One of these, "Keepsake," Webster intended for a child or baby's bed. At each end and along each side of the green-and-white quilt, two Sunbonnet figures stood before a picket fence, one holding an umbrella. Webster's quilt was exhibited in the Marshall Field's store in downtown Chicago, and a few years later a quilt from this pattern



Don't you think it will be well for you to heed the writing on the wall and buy your Fall outfit now?

If you buy your Fall and Winter things while they are new, instead of waiting until they are picked over and "picked out!"

It really saves you money to buy your clothes early in the season, because you can use them longer.

Cordially,  
**Chisago County Co-Operative Company,**  
Lindstrom Minnesota

Chisago County Press, *August 29, 1912*



*Bertha Corbett Melcher and her daughter Ruth (far left), Topanga Canyon, 1915*

was for sale (for ten dollars) in the Homeworkers Fair organized by the *Chicago Tribune*.<sup>37</sup>

At about the same time, other women were purchasing stamped embroidery patterns of the Sunbonnet Babies, often in the poses from Corbett's first book. The completed squares could be stitched together to make a quilt. Textile historian Deborah Harding's recent book shows two examples either partially or completely composed of these squares: "Nursery Rhyme" and "Sunbonnets," dated as early as 1910. Recent statewide surveys across the country have found many other examples of embroidered and appliquéd Sunbonnet quilts. *Minnesota Quilts* illustrates three examples, including Alice Covell's 1915 medallion quilt with Sunbonnet Babies set in a ring at the center.<sup>38</sup>

The Sunbonnet figure was easy to cut, assemble, and stitch. It required only four pieces: bonnet, dress, arm, and a blob-like appendage to indicate a foot and shoe. The bright colors of feedsack cottons were perfect for the dresses, and the concept was appropriate for a child or baby's quilt. Beginning in the 1920s, and especially in the 1930s, patterns were available from magazines, newspapers, and commercial purveyors. Although Eulalie

Grover had named the Babies Molly and May, the alliterative name for the quilt figure was Sue, perhaps taken from Bernhardt Wall's postcard book.

Research on the history and development of the Sunbonnet Sue pattern has uncovered at least 200 different examples. A quilt using 79 of these patterns won the sweepstakes award at the Kansas State Fair in 1978. As might be expected, the very popularity of the figure eventually made the quilts seem, as quilt historian Jean Ray Laury wrote, "too cute, too corny, too trite."<sup>39</sup> Sunbonnet Sue was an easy first project but no challenge for a more experienced quilter.

Adaptations by two quilting groups attacked the sentimentality of the figure. Each block in "The Sun Sets on Sunbonnet Sue" by the Seamsters Local 500 of Lawrence, Kansas, shows her demise by hanging, lightning strike, nuclear fallout, and other means. "Scandalous Sue" allows Sue to be bad—and not in a mischievous way that Bertha Corbett Melcher might approve. She drinks, smokes, and is pregnant in blocks designed by the Bee There quilters of Austin, Texas. The two quilts shocked some, but historian Laury saw another message. In the needles and threads of generations of quilters, Sue's



Appliqué quilt patch: four easy pieces

image changed, just as her hats and skirt lengths did. “Her story is a reflection of every quilter’s story. She may *look* out of date, but she epitomizes the women of today. She emerged as a contemporary symbol; she is the ‘every-woman of quilting.’”<sup>40</sup> Laury went on to write and illustrate four small books with a contemporary Sunbonnet Sue as the heroine. Bertha Corbett Melcher’s Sunbonnet Babies had thus evolved into adult women whose only link to their creator was the face-covering bonnet.

**M**ore than a century after their birth, on paper, china, wood, and cloth, Melcher’s little girls—now highly collectible—are part of Minnesota’s artistic heritage. The Sunbonnet Babies became popular at the outset of Melcher’s career, and she soon seized opportunities to introduce her creations into various media. Other artists imitated her work, but Melcher wisely secured her creative legacy by signing and copyrighting her drawings. Her babies are part of a line of bonneted children that stretches from Kate Greenaway in the nineteenth century to Tasha Tudor in the twenty-first, yet unlike these, Melcher’s lack a quaint or nostalgic feel. She drew what she knew from her time and place: Minnesota in the 1890s. □

## Notes

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1. Here and below, United States, *Census*, 1900, *Population*, Minneapolis, Ward 13, enumeration district 126, sheet 5; Jeffrey Hess, *Their Splendid Legacy: The First 100 Years of the Minneapolis Society of Fine Arts* (Minneapolis: Society of Fine Arts, 1985), 11. Lists of students from the Society’s annual catalogues, 1889–90 and 1890–91, Minneapolis College of Art and Design archives.

2. James Whitcomb Riley to Bertha Corbett, May 6, 1896, courtesy Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington.

3. Marcus Dickey, *The Maturity of James Whitcomb Riley* (Indianapolis:

Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1922), 346–47. One of the best known of Riley’s illustrators was Howard Chandler Christy.

4. Peter H. Falk, ed., *Who Was Who in American Art* (Madison, CT: Sound View Press, 1985), 413; *Davison’s Minneapolis City Directory, 1897*.

5. Georgia S. Chamberlain, “Sunbonnet Babies and Overall Boys,” *Spinning Wheel* (Apr. 1955): 12; Gareth Hiebert, “Sales, Shows to Honor Alice Hugy,” *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, Mar. 5, 1967, p. 15, 20. On Smith, see Dave Stivers, *The Nabisco Brands Collection of Cream of Wheat Advertising Art* (San Diego: Collectors’ Showcase, 1986), 50, for which she was paid \$416.

6. Bertha L. Corbett to James Whitcomb Riley, June 4, 1900, Lilly Library, saying that “her daughters” were three years old; *Minneapolis Tribune*, Oct. 21, 1962, p. H6; *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Apr. 20, 1902, p. 57.

7. Bertha Corbett to Edwin Osgood Grover, Feb. 8, 1902, Grover Family Collection, Winter Park (FL) Public Library.

8. Chamberlain, “Sunbonnet Babies,” 12. The first copy of the limited edition, autographed for Mrs. E. D. Brooks, was offered on eBay in February 2009.

9. *Minneapolis Journal*, June 1, 1900, p. 10.

10. *Public Opinion* 29 (1900): 732.

11. Ida S. Bison, *Birdies* (Minneapolis: William G. Smith, 1901); *A Trip to Egypt by Dreamland Babies* (Minneapolis: Pillsbury-Washburn Flour Mills, 1900); sheet music cover in author’s collection. More coloring books from local flour mills are in the Minnesota Historical Society’s Richard Ferrell Flour Milling Industry History Collection.

12. Virginia France, *The Sunbonnet Babies* (Rochester, NY: Strong Museum, [1985?]), 3.

13. Eulalie Osgood Grover, *The Sunbonnet Babies Primer* (Chicago: Rand, McNally, 1902), 106.

14. Anita Silvey, ed., *Children’s Books and Their Creators* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1995), 175–76, 282.

15. *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Apr. 20, 1902, p. 57.

16. Ruth E. Hilpert, *Readings in the Saint Cloud Public Schools, Grades One to Six* (St. Cloud: Board of Education, 1925), 62; William C. Bagley and George P. Brown, *School and Home Education* (Chicago: Rand, McNally, 1902), 54; Grover, *Sunbon-*

net Babies Primer, flyleaves, 104–05. The music was performed outside of classrooms, too. In May 1908, for example, a charity event in Chicago included a Sunbonnet Babies dance done by a group of six-year-olds; *Chicago Tribune*, May 10, 1908, p. H11.

17. Moira F. Harris, *By the Shores of Ki-Chi-Saga: A History of Chisago City* (Lakeville, MN: Pogo Press, 2006), 95; Gloria Huffman Sinell, “Country School Days,” *Minnesota Historical Society: Share Your Stories*, 2006, <http://people.mnhs.org/mgg/stories.cfm>; personal communication to author.

18. Margaret Tyson Applegate, *Fifty-two Primary Missionary Stories* (New York: Board of Publications and Bible Study Work, 1917), 173.

19. Bertha L. Corbett to Edwin Grover, Oct. 20, 1908, Grover Family Collection. The words in *The Sun-bonnet Babies* (1900) appear above an inkwell and eight babies marching off to a world of adventures. Corbett’s letter is not an exact quote of the published rhyme.

20. Wheeler and Baldwin advertisement, *The Delineator* 57 (June 1903): 282.

21. *Publisher’s Weekly*, Sept. 30, 1905, p. 16, listed the *Sunbonnet Babies Color Cards* at 15 cents per dozen and another set, *Baby’s Letter to Santa Claus*, at 50 cents per dozen. Wilhelmina Seegmiller, *Primary Handwork: A Graded Course for the First Four Years* (Chicago: Atkinson, Mentzer, and Grover, 1906), 125–26, 136. In 1911 Edwin Grover left Rand, McNally for Atkinson, Mentzer, and Grover, where he was vice-president and editor.

22. For example, in 1909 Hamm’s Brewery, St. Paul, sold a baby record book for 25 cents and four bottle caps from its Digest malt extract; Moira F. Harris, *The Paws of Refreshment: The Story of Hamm’s Beer Advertising* (St. Paul: Pogo Press, 1990), 13.

23. France, *Sunbonnet Babies*, 4; Georgia S. Chamberlain, “Collect Sunbonnet Babies,” *Hobbies*, Jan. 1954, p. 80; *Chicago Tribune* ads, for example: Mandel Brothers, Oct. 23, 1904, p. C8; Rothschild and Co., Aug. 20, 1905, p. B10; Siegel Cooper and Co. Mar. 11, 1906, p. 14. Corbett did some

china painting of her own. She was a “designer, maker, exhibitor” in a 1906 show at the Art Institute of Chicago, where she displayed a tea tray painted with Sunbonnet Babies; *Catalogue of the Annual Exhibition of Original Designs for Decorations* (Chicago: Art Institute, 1907), 29.

24. “Sunbonnet Babies and Their Artists,” *Deltiology* 12 (Nov.–Dec. 1971): 3–4, lists 12 different sets of imitative Sunbonnet Babies or Twins postcards. See also, Uncle Milton, *The Sunbonnet Twins* (New York: Cupples and Leon, 1907). Wall drew boys like the ones Corbett originated, and his characters appeared on chinaware, too.

25. Especially fine and elegant examples were drawn by Bertha Blodgett and Irene Nister in the pre-World War I era. On Blodgett, see George and Dorothy Miller, *Picture Postcards in the United States 1898–1918* (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1976), 203–04.

26. Julia Darrow Cowles, “The Mother of the Sun-Bonnet Babies,” *The Housekeeper*, Sept. 1907, p. 10; Georgia S. Chamberlain, “Paper Dolls of the Sunbonnet Babies and Overall Boys,” *Hobbies*, May 1968, p. 41, 98B. Most early issues of *The Housekeeper* have been priced at \$10 per copy on eBay, but one with Corbett’s paper dolls listed at \$50.

27. *Minneapolis Journal*, Sept. 20, 1906, p. 7.

28. Charlotte R. Gutshall, “My Famous Little Mother,” typescript, 1985, Topanga Historical Society, Topanga, CA; *Pasadena Daily News*, Jan. 27, 1908, p. 6.

29. Bill Blackbeard, *R. F. Outcault’s The Yellow Kid* (Northampton, MA: Kitchen Sink Press, 1995), 131. Although the illustrations for advertisements were copyrighted, no information could be obtained about whether and, if so, when or by whom the company was incorporated; telephone communication, Illinois Secretary of State’s office, May 27, 2009.

30. *Catalogue of Copyright Entries* (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 1907), 646.

31. Stephen Becker, *Comic Art in America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1959), 27.

32. *Pasadena Daily News*, Jan. 14, 1908, p. 7.

33. *Minneapolis Journal*, Aug. 17, 1910, p. 5; *Sunset*, May 1917, p. 40.

34. *Sunset*, May 1917, p. 40; *Catalogue of the Twelfth Annual Art Exhibit . . . Minnesota State Fair* (Hamline: Minnesota State Art Society, 1915), 8.

35. Louise Armstrong York, *The Topanga Story* (Topanga, CA: Topanga Historical Society, 1992), 42.

36. Patricia Cox, “Connections to Quilting Fads and Fancies of the Twentieth Century,” in *Minnesota Quilts*, ed. Minnesota Quilt Project (Stillwater, MN: Voyageur Press, 2005), 148.

37. Marie D. Webster, *Quilts: Their Story and How to Make Them* (Santa Barbara, CA: Practical Patchwork, 1990): plate 4 and Rosalind Webster Perry, “Marie Webster: Her Story,” 208–11; Sally Joy Brown columns, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Dec. 17, 1912, p. 15, Jan. 26, 1913, p. F2, May 9, 1913, p. 13. The fair, like other Women’s Exchanges across the nation, was founded to provide a source of income for homemakers. Other women offered Sunbonnet Babies-shaped cookies with pink frosting, and a letter to the *Tribune* from Seattle suggested that Chicago women try painting china tea sets with Sunbonnet figures.

38. Deborah Harding, *Red & White: American Redwork Quilts and Patterns* (New York: Rizzoli International, 2000), 100, 112; Minnesota Quilt Project, *Minnesota Quilts*, 53.

39. Betty J. Hagerman, *A Meeting of the Sunbonnet Children* (Baldwin City, KS: self-published, 1979); “A Meeting of the Sunbonnet Children,” *Quilters’ National Magazine*, Apr. 1979, p. 7; Jean Ray Laury, “Sue Makes a Comeback,” *Quilters’ National Magazine*, June 1987, p. 18–21.

40. Linda Pershing, “She Really Wanted to be Her Own Woman: Scandalous Sunbonnet Sue,” in *Feminist Messages: Coding in Women’s Folk Culture*, ed. Joan N. Radner (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 98–125; Laury, “Sue Makes a Comeback,” 19.

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*The quotation from James Whitcomb Riley’s letter is courtesy Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN.*

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