Doll Making

The project designed a 22 inch doll specifically for the WPA nursery schools to meet the following requirements: large enough for a small child to handle easily, completely washable, jointed to sit and stand, and dressed with clothes designed to help teach the young child to dress and undress.

The soft dolls and those with screen printed features (Katie, twins Peter and Patsy, and Honey Child) were added later.
The large dolls were hinged so that they could sit and stand.
The 22” doll head was made of ribbed cotton, cast in a plaster mould designed by Dick Wiken and painted by hand. While the same mould was used for all the 22” doll faces, workers used different skin, eye and hair colors to create a variety of doll personalities.
Carpet warp was used to make wigs of various styles. Bernice Ware, shown here, became a skilled wig maker. At a time when few black dolls were made commercially, workers produced both black and white dolls for the WPA nurseries and county institutions.
Women assigned to the doll unit were trained by Helen Clark (below), a woman in her fifties who had supported herself and her mother making dolls until the Depression.
The wide variety of doll outfits made the work more interesting and increased the number of orders. Elementary school teachers requested dolls with foreign outfits. Kindergarten teachers liked the dolls dressed as storybook and nursery rhyme characters.
During the last years of the project as more doll makers found private employment, Elizabeth Pasler (above), one of the designers, created a group of enchanting (and easier to make) cloth dolls with screen-printed features.
The largest collection of Milwaukee Handicraft Project dolls and toys is at the Milwaukee Public Museum. (MPM postcard)
See Mary Kellogg Rice, *Useful Work for Unskilled Women: A Unique Milwaukee WPA Project* (Milwaukee County Historical Society, 2003) for references and photo credits.