

A Welcome Home for Rose O'Neill

by Lynne Belluscio

It was like Christmas when I opened the two huge boxes from Springfield, Missouri. Two weeks earlier, I found a note on my desk, "Donna Davis called about original Rose O'Neill advertising. Please call her back." "No way," I thought to myself. "They are probably just magazine ads in good condition." I called her back. She had called on behalf of David O'Neill, from the Rose O'Neill Foundation. I learned that Mr. O'Neill was dispersing his collection, and wanted to know if we were interested in four original illustrations by Rose O'Neill. I'm thinking to myself - - "How in blazes am I going to be able to raise enough money to buy original illustrations by Rose O'Neill?" The last original Jell-O art that I bought for the Jell-O Museum was \$2000 and that was an unsigned oil painting. I had to pass up an original Angus Macdonall of "Goldilocks and the Three Bears" a couple of years ago, because the price was sky high. Now original Rose O'Neill illustrations. But I thought at least it would be worth a try. Maybe he would consider that the Historical Society doesn't have that kind of money. "Oh, my." I said. "We would certainly want to have the opportunity to make an offer, but I'm pretty sure we can't afford them." "Oh no, David wants to give them to the Jell-O Museum. He just wants to make sure that they go to the best place. He is closing the museum, and he wants to make sure that the Rose O'Neill pieces go to a good home. Some are going to universities and some to art museums, but the four Jell-O pieces need to go to the Jell-O Museum." I'm sure I

must have stammered something, that made no sense at all, and as soon as I started to think again, I said, "We certainly will pay for shipping! I cannot believe that Mr. O'Neill is giving these to us. What a wonderful gift." And so, after a few days, the two large boxes arrived. As I carefully opened the boxes, I was truly amazed. There, with her original brush strokes, were four signed pieces - - including a very well-known color Kewpie illustration.

Rose O'Neill was a famous American artist. She was born in 1874 in Pennsylvania, but her family moved to rural Nebraska where she grew up. Rose showed amazing artistic talent when she was very young, and at the age of 15, she went to New York City to begin a career in commercial art. In 1909, she introduced the "Kewpies" - - little pixie-like characters with little blue wings, which appeared in cartoons. The Kewpies were later made into bisque dolls and they became so popular that they were mass produced in celluloid and composition materials. They are considered one of the first mass-marketed toys in the United States. For a time, she was the highest paid female illustrator in the world - based on the income from the Kewpies.

It was during this time, that she created over 100 illustrations for Jell-O that were used for magazine ads, recipe books, and Jell-O advertising pieces. The illustrations are signed with her unique "drip-like" letters. Rose was a most unusual woman. She was considered to be a millionaire, because of the success of the Kewpies and she had several homes - one in Italy. But she really considered "Bon-



This large black and white illustration was included in Jell-O advertising in 1910. The title of the illustration was "Nan Instructs Bobbie." It was featured in McCall's, The Delineator, The Ladies' Home Journal, Woman's Home Companion. A colored version was used on a small booklet. At the time this illustration was used, Jell-O was available in seven flavors: strawberry, raspberry, lemon, orange, cherry, peach, and chocolate. This original illustration is not on exhibit because it needs to be framed and matted with acid free materials. The other three illustrations are now on exhibit in the Jell-O Gallery, but will be removed this winter for conservation and reframing.

niebrook", her home in Branson, Missouri, to be her favorite. She died in 1944. By that time she was in severe financial straights and Bonniebrook was in terrible condition. Family members went into the house to collect her artwork and other furnishings. Tragically, in 1947 Bonniebrook burned to the ground. David O'Neill was five years old when his great aunt died. His uncle Paul O'Neill became the administrator of the estate of Rose O'Neill and moved the artwork to Springfield, Missouri. In 1989 David O'Neill became executor of the estate and the family created the Rose O'Neill Charitable Foundation in order to keep the art together as one unit. In 1975 the Bonniebrook Historical Society was

founded by a group of people interested in the education of Rose O'Neill's life and in 1993, they rebuilt Bonniebrook which includes a museum and art gallery. In the meantime, David O'Neill maintained the museum in Springfield which had the largest collection of original O'Neill pieces. But in October 2017 the museum closed and the Foundation decided that the art should be divided and donated to museums and colleges. I can only imagine how difficult it must have been to decide to disperse the Foundation collection, but we are making sure that our four new O'Neil pieces will have a prominent place in the gallery.

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