

MORTON BARTLETT

In 1993 Marion Harris, a New York art and antiques dealer made the discovery of her life in a booth at the Pier Show. She came upon a collection of dolls and doll parts in boxes, along with stacks of old photographs. The material had been removed from a townhouse in Boston's South End after the death of its elderly owner, a man named Morton Bartlett (1909–1992). Acting on pure instinct, she bought everything and when she got it all home she discovered that what she had purchased was a group of 15 exquisitely realistic, half life-size dolls carefully wrapped in old newspapers and stored in custom made wooden boxes. Three of them represented a boy of about eight years old, and the rest were sculptures of girls between the ages of eight and sixteen. A self-taught artist, Bartlett created his fifteen extraordinary lifelike dolls between 1936 and 1963. It took him over a year to finish each sculpture, working from anatomical and costume books. He clothed his precious sculptures in fashions that he expertly stitched and knitted himself, and then photographed them. Bartlett did not use photography simply to document his works. He used the camera to enhance their true to life nature and to suggest narrative situations. Some writers have theorized that Bartlett was more interested in the photographs than the sculptures—that the sculptures were props in the creation of cinematic characters.

Born in Chicago, Morton Bartlett was orphaned when he was eight, and was adopted shortly thereafter by Mr. and Mrs. Warren Goddard Bartlett, a wealthy couple who lived in Cohasset. He attended the prestigious Phillips Exeter Academy and studied at Harvard University for two years from 1928 to 1930. After leaving college—perhaps because of financial reversals related to The Great Depression—Bartlett pursued a variety of business enterprises. He managed a gas station, sold furniture, and manufactured and sold giftware. He served in the US Army during World War II, and after the war he settled into a career as a freelance graphic designer and photographer. During this time he was making his sculptures solely to satisfy his creative needs. In the Harvard class of 1932 25th Anniversary Report, Bartlett states, "My hobby is sculpting in plaster. Its purpose is that of all hobbies—to let out urges that do not find expression in other channels."

The new color prints presented here have been made from a cache of color slides recently discovered by a Los Angeles collector. Previously, Bartlett was thought to have made only black and white photographs of his sculptures. These photographs are from circa 1955 original Kodachrome slide transparencies, and were printed in the Fall of 2006 on Kodak Ultra Endura Chromogenic paper by Chip Leavitt at Lumiere Editions, Los Angeles, in an edition of ten numbered examples and two printer's proofs.