

# Design Museum opens Barbie exhibition, featuring rare first edition doll and 250 objects

## **Barbie®: The Exhibition**

05 July 2024 – 23 February 2025

the Design Museum

### PRESS IMAGES AVAILABLE

- **Design Museum unveils over 250 objects displayed in its major Barbie exhibition — including over 180 remarkable dolls**
- **Rare first edition Barbie from 1959 amongst the highlights, alongside one-of-a-kind Talking Barbie prototype and best-selling Totally Hair Barbie**
- **Also shown is a Barbie taken into space by astronaut Samantha Cristoforetti and exhibited for the first time ever**
- **Hugely anticipated exhibition is designed by Sam Jacob Studio and charts the 65-year design evolution of the world's most famous doll**

The Design Museum in London today unveils the dolls, dresses and Dreamhouses inside its major Barbie exhibition.

Opening to mark the 65th anniversary of the Barbie brand, *Barbie®: The Exhibition* — in partnership with Mattel, a leading global toy company — features over 180 remarkable dolls, with rare, unique and innovative Barbie dolls and accessories amongst the highlights.

Visitors will come face-to-face with important and distinctive dolls, from the first Barbie to 'move' to the first Barbie to 'talk', as well as a vast selection of others that have been a part of the Barbie universe and have made an impact on culture throughout the decades.

The exhibition — opening on Friday and running until February 2025 — explores Barbie's changing appearance in relation to evolving cultural shifts around diversity and representation. It presents exclusive, behind-the-scenes insights into Mattel's design processes, and offers a detailed exploration of the Barbie doll as a technically and materially innovative creation.

The dolls are showcased alongside a vast array of other items and accessories from the universe of Barbie, displayed together in a stunning exhibition landscape designed by Sam Jacob Studio. Over 250 pieces are on show in total, dating from 1959 to the present day,

and collectively charting 65 years of design evolution of the world's most famous doll.

Highlights include some of the most recognisable and best-selling dolls, including the 'surfer girl' **Sunset Malibu Barbie** from 1971 and which was one of the most popular of the decade, and the ground-breaking **Day to Night Barbie** from 1985 that was designed to reflect the workplace revolution for women in the 1980s, and which saw Barbie's work-attire pink suit transform into a chic evening gown. There's also two examples of 1992's **Totally Hair Barbie**, the best-selling Barbie of all time which has sold over 10 million across the globe.

There are examples of the first Black, Hispanic and Asian dolls to bear the Barbie name on display, as well as dolls that reflect today's diverse, multicultural society. These include the first Barbie with Down syndrome, the first to use a wheelchair, and the first to be designed with a 'curvy' body shape.

Special dolls on show also include a unique prototype of the very first **Talking Barbie** (launched in 1968), which is one of several rare items borrowed directly from the Mattel headquarters archives in Los Angeles. This prototype has a transparent torso, intended to display the doll's voice mechanism — activated by a pull-string — to prospective wholesalers and toy buyers.

Many friends of Barbie are also displayed, including her first friend Midge, the much-loved Christie and Teresa, as well as the younger sister of Barbie, Skipper.

There's also a section dedicated to Ken, which will see six decades' worth of Ken dolls charting his evolution from his introduction in 1961.

### **First edition Barbie**

Another major highlight of the exhibition is the first object that visitors will encounter as they enter the Design Museum's gallery: one of the earliest first edition Barbie dolls.

The doll — known by collectors as the 'Number 1 Barbie' as it was the very first model released by Mattel in 1959 — is now extremely sought after.

Hand-painted and featuring Barbie in a black-and-white bathing suit, the doll on display is an especially rare first edition that features holes in Barbie's feet where it would have been fixed to a stand.

The Design Museum has acquired this Number 1 doll for its collection. Purchased with the support of the Conran Foundation, it's thought that this example is now the oldest Barbie doll in a museum collection in the UK.

Visitors will see the very first Barbie in close-up alongside archival footage of the first Barbie TV commercial (also from 1959), and this introductory section will offer an insight into the production and marketing of the doll — showing how Barbie 'the doll' soon developed into Barbie 'the brand'.

### **Samantha Cristoforetti Barbie**

The exhibition also includes the very first public display of a unique Barbie doll that has been into space. The doll spent six months orbiting the Earth on the International Space Station in 2022 as part of a landmark mission.

The Barbie is a likeness of European Space Agency (ESA) astronaut and Europe's first female commander of the International Space Station, Samantha Cristoforetti.

Cristoforetti blasted off with her lookalike Barbie in April 2022 on a 170-day mission to the space station which also saw Cristoforetti make history as the first European woman to complete a spacewalk.

While in orbit and accompanied by her doll, she answered questions from five young girls as part of Barbie and the ESA's joint mission to encourage girls to become the next generation of astronauts, engineers and scientists. Video footage of these conversations — with both Samantha and Barbie floating in zero gravity — will be shown in the exhibition alongside the doll.

The Cristoforetti doll has never been displayed since its return to Earth. It comes to London on loan from the European Space Agency, and its inclusion in the Design Museum's Barbie exhibition marks the latest chapter in Barbie's association with space travel, which will be highlighted in the show.

### **The Barbie universe**

*Barbie®: The Exhibition* is an expansive journey into the Barbie universe. It shows how it has been shaped since her creation by a huge variety of playsets, vehicles, houses and other accessories

which collectively have helped 'design' the universe in which she exists.

A rare example of the first ever Barbie Dreamhouse — released in 1962, made from cardboard and sporting the distinctly modernist design of its era — is among the Barbie homes on show.

Visitors will also be able to see examples of Barbie's vehicles, such as her first car (also from 1962) and her first campervan (from 1971), alongside a whole range of other 'locations' — from ski cabins to space stations.

Together these items show how Barbie and her accompanying accessories have always reflected the tastes and trends of the day, and how they have engaged with modern design in an aspirational but accessible way.

Exhibition goers will also be able to see the influence of major designers and architects — from Florence Knoll to Frank Gehry — on the Barbie universe, as well as the significance of various mainstream trends and big retailers.

### **Barbie and fashion**

Fashion is a significant theme running through the show. Across the exhibition, there are dozens of original Barbie outfits which both highlight Barbie's origins as a fashion doll, and her impact on the wider history of modern dress. This includes outfits such as 'Poodle Parade' (1965) — a life-size replica of which was worn by Billie Eilish when she performed at the 2024 Grammy Awards in February — and a 1985 outfit by Oscar de la Renta, the first of many designer collaborations with the brand.

Visitors can trace the changing silhouettes of mainstream fashion over the last 65 years through the exhibition, and they will see the influence of designers — from Claire McCardell and Christian Dior, to Nolan Miller and Zac Posen — on Barbie fashion choices.

The final section of the show spotlights the enduring role Barbie has as a pop culture icon, looking at her impact on design in all its forms, from fashion to film, as well as the Barbie brand's forays into social advocacy. This section also includes an original costume worn by Margot Robbie in the 2023 movie *Barbie*, as well as other items that explore Barbie's status as a cultural figurehead.

*Barbie®: The Exhibition* is the first time a major UK museum has held a major show dedicated to Barbie. It's been made possible through a partnership with Mattel Inc, allowing the Design Museum to draw on Mattel's Barbie archives in California for a number of key loans, as well as utilising the expertise of Mattel's brand historians and archivists.

**Tim Marlow, Director and CEO of the Design Museum** said:

“Design has been at the heart of Barbie’s story ever since her creation 65 years ago. And as we’ve seen recently, her impact has also evolved with each new generation. Visitors to our timely exhibition will come face-to-face with some of the most important and recognisable iterations of Barbie from across the past six-and-a-half decades, and we hope it will be a joyful, fascinating, inspiring, illuminating and even perhaps nostalgic experience for generations of Barbie fans.”

**Danielle Thom, Curator of *Barbie®: The Exhibition* at the Design Museum**, said: “The Barbie universe is expansive and exciting, and it’s thanks to the meticulous work of talented designers over the past 65 years. Barbie is arguably one of the most globally recognised examples of world-building through product and graphic design, and in turn she has inspired many designers and artists to respond to her history. The design story of Barbie is a rich topic for our museum to put under the spotlight.”

**Kim Culmone, SVP of Design for Mattel**, said “Since her debut in 1959, Barbie has become an international icon and inspiration that continues to spark conversation, creativity, and self-expression around the world. This exhibition tells the story of Barbie through a design lens including fashion, architecture, furniture, and vehicle design, which are all spaces where she has left a mark on culture during her remarkable 65-year career. We can’t wait for fans and audiences to experience this exhibition with the renowned Design Museum.’

*Barbie®: The Exhibition* opens at the Design Museum on 05 July 2024 and runs until 23 February 2025.

**-Ends-**

**Notes to Editors**

**PRESS ENQUIRIES:**

Maxwell Blowfield, Senior Media and PR Manager

E: [maxwell.blowfield@designmuseum.org](mailto:maxwell.blowfield@designmuseum.org)

the  
DESIGN  
MUSEUM

Press Office  
E: [pr@designmuseum.org](mailto:pr@designmuseum.org)

**About the Design Museum:**

The Design Museum is a multifaceted museum, an ever-changing space for the public, industry and education to come together and explore new ideas. A registered charity, the museum's innovative exhibitions, partnerships, research and learning programmes evidence how design can enable this planet and its inhabitants to thrive. Our landmark building in Kensington is the centre of our national network and a global hub for the transformative potential of design.



Supported using public funding by

**ARTS COUNCIL  
ENGLAND**

[designmuseum.org](http://designmuseum.org)  
[@designmuseum](https://www.instagram.com/designmuseum)

**About Mattel**

Mattel is a leading global toy company and owner of one of the strongest portfolios of children's and family entertainment franchises in the world. We create innovative products and experiences that inspire, entertain, and develop children through play. We engage consumers through our portfolio of iconic brands, including Barbie®, Hot Wheels®, Fisher-Price®, American Girl®, Thomas & Friends™, UNO®, Masters of the Universe®, and MEGA®, as well as other popular intellectual properties that we own or license in partnership with global entertainment companies. Our offerings include film and television content, gaming and digital experiences, music, and live events. Founded in 1945, we operate in 35 locations and our products are available in more than 150 countries in collaboration with the world's leading retail and ecommerce companies. Mattel is proud to be a trusted partner in empowering children to explore the wonder of childhood and reach their full potential. Visit us online at [mattel.com](http://mattel.com)