

This unusual moon man figurine emerged from the depths of a privy during excavations in the former backyard of a brick row home at 1018 Palmer Street in Kensington. His large moon head, exaggerated facial features, and costumed human body give this figure a cartoon-like quality. This bisque (unglazed) porcelain figurine was discarded in a privy, along with over 7,300 other domestic artifacts. Although time had faded his once brightly colored features, the lengthy stay underground did not dampen the moon man's charming grin.

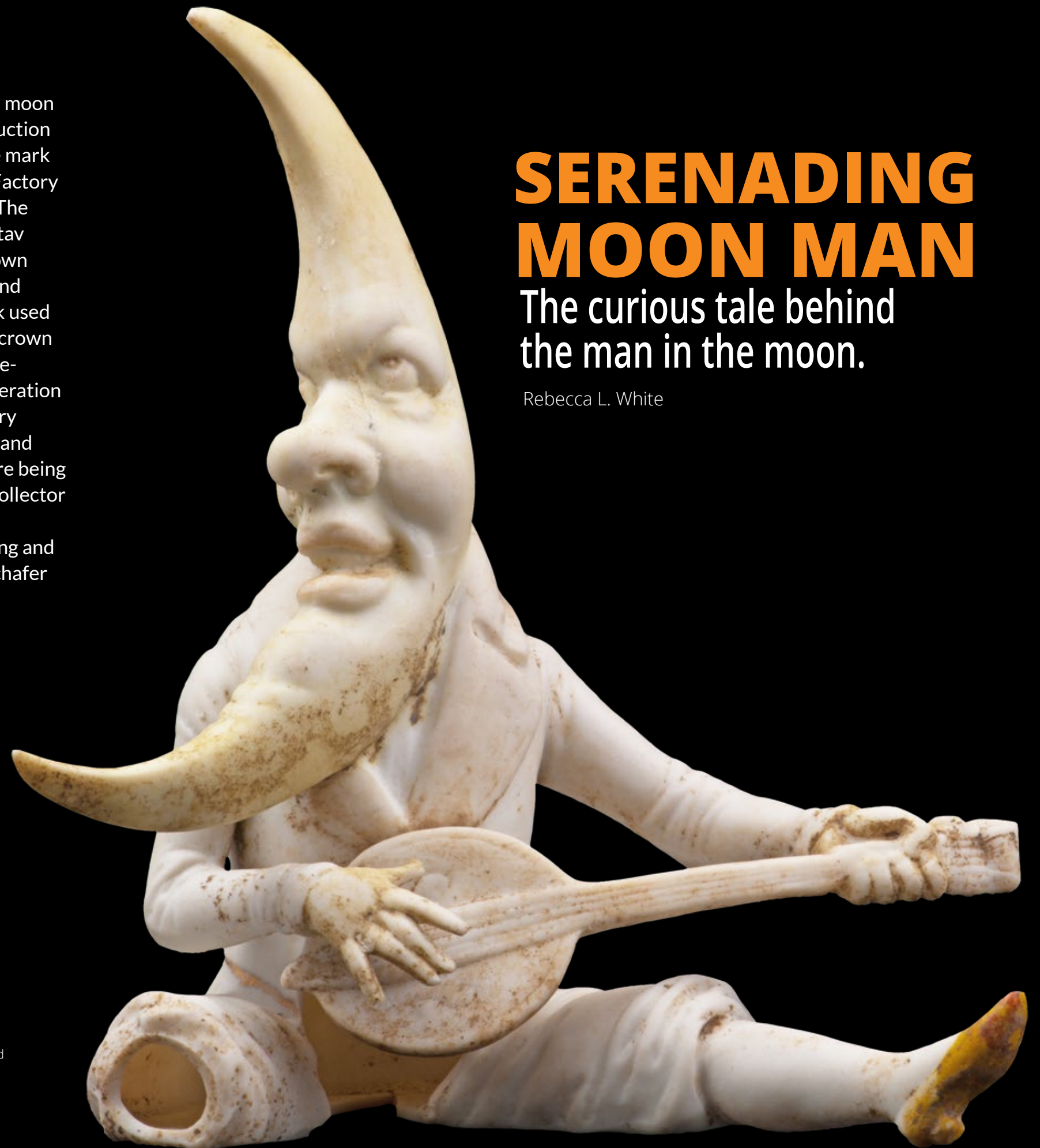
This figurine was molded from white porcelain clay that captured every subtle detail of the moon man's small form, down to his fingernails, the creases in his coat, and the strings on his mandolin. The lower portion of his right leg and part of the base were not recovered, suggesting that they may have been lost during some prior misadventure and disposed of elsewhere. The absence of a manufacturer's mark hampered efforts to identify this figurine. Potteries often stamped or printed a distinctive symbol or mark on the back or base of figurines to identify the products of a specific factory. This figurine may have been marked on the missing pieces at the seat of his pants.

Continued efforts to identify the moon man revealed an example from an auction site of the same figurine bearing the mark of the Schafer and Vater Porcelain Factory in Rudolstadt, Thuringia, Germany. The pottery, established in 1890 by Gustav Schafer and Gunther Vater, was known for producing household ceramics and figurines.¹ The manufacturer's mark used by Schafer and Vater consisted of a crown above a script letter "R" within a nine-pointed star.² The factory was in operation until 1962.³ A United States Treasury tariff document shows that Schafer and Vater "Figures décoré, seconds" were being shipped to this country by 1899.⁴ Collector research states that by 1910, Sears, Roebuck and Company was importing and selling porcelain produced by the Schafer and Vater factory.⁵

SERENADING MOON MAN

The curious tale behind the man in the moon.

Rebecca L. White



Serenading Moon Man.

Bisque porcelain figurine made by the Schafer and Vater Porcelain Factory in Rudolstadt, Thuringia, Germany, circa 1900.

Photograph by Thomas J. Kutys, 2014.

By examining other items made by Schafer and Vater, we discovered that the figurine excavated in Kensington was part of a series of moon men and sun-head women arranged in various romantic and leisurely poses. To date, we have found auction photographs that document four moon men and two sun women. In addition to the man with the mandolin, one moon man is reclining on his back smoking a pipe and reading a book. Another moon figurine is kneeling with a top hat in one hand and a bouquet of flowers extended in the other. The fourth moon man is lying on his stomach, eyes closed, with a small red bird perched on the tip of his crescent chin. An auction photograph shows examples with a mandolin and a red bird. The two seated sun ladies appear to be companion pieces to the moon men, with one playing a mandolin while the other has a small red bird sitting on her long skirt.



Schafer and Vater moon men.
Image courtesy of Heritage Auction.



This French postcard (circa 1900) shows Pierrot serenading Pierrette, who appears as the face of the moon. Author's private collection.

Some Schafer and Vater moon and sun figures were marked with model numbers that range from 3150–3155.⁶ A recent auction offered a moon man playing a mandolin marked with the model number 3153. Photographs on auction sites also show the original painted colors of the figurine, which featured a bright yellow head, facial features and mandolin in brown, black lapels, and red dress slippers.

The “man in the moon” and “Pierrot and the moon” were common themes in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This particular figurine with his costume and mandolin may have been inspired by the character Pierrot Lunaire that originated from seventeenth-century Commedia dell’arte in France. Pierrot Lunaire was the subject of a collection of poetry by the Belgian poet Albert Giraud in 1884 and the title of a melodramatic opera by composer Arnold Schoenberg in the early twentieth century. Variations of the moon man and Pierrot were also popular themes on French and German postcards from this time period.

The recovered figurine represents a piece of bric-a-brac, a term used during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to define small ornaments of little value. Similar objects were commonly used in the parlor or sitting room to decorate a mantle or shelf. These small objects might have been gifts or souvenirs that were shifted from the front to the back or edge of the mantle over time to make room for newer acquisitions. Once these items were broken or lost their appeal, they were destined for the trash heap or relegated to the old privy that needed to be filled. While other households along the project area deposited similar broken ornaments into their privies, to date no other Schafer and Vater figurines have been recovered from the I-95 excavations.

Despite his small stature, this moon man figurine from a privy in Kensington has achieved celebrity status in the twenty-first century. He has made appearances on fliers, posters, and in person at various public events and exhibits related to the I-95 archaeological project. Our interactive media team created a digital model of the moon man using a 3-D scan, which you can view through the link below.



Postcard printed in Germany in 1909.
Author's private collection.

Rebecca L. White has over eighteen years of experience in archaeological investigations and artifact analysis within the Mid-Atlantic and Northeast regions of the United States. Research interests include the identification of American manufacturing and industrial sites and related artifacts.

View the interactive Moon Man

Scan the QR Code

Or visit: <http://diggingi95.com/moon-man/>



Schafer and Vater sun women.
Image courtesy of Heritage Auction.