

Disney adds African-American Princess Tiana to royal family

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By Charisse Jones, USA TODAY

Move over Snow White. Make room for Princess Tiana.

For the first time, Disney is creating a film with an African-American princess whose doll will make its debut Monday at the American International Toy Fair in New York City.

For Disney, it's not just about being culturally and politically correct, it's also about growing its lucrative — but aging — Disney Princess franchise in a tough economy. Created in 1999, Disney Princesses had \$4 billion in global retail sales last year.

The cocoa-colored doll, which sports a tiara and a flowing blue gown, and is roughly the size of a Barbie, is expected to sell for about the same \$10 to \$15 as Barbie. Disney hopes it will boost the franchise through rough times. The \$22 billion toy industry saw sales fall about 3% last year, and sales of dolls dropped a hefty 8%, according to the Toy Industry Association.

Though Princess Tiana was on the drawing board long before Barack Obama was elected the nation's first black president, marketing experts say she signals a growing awareness by industries from toymakers to cosmetic companies that diversity is critical in a nation where people of color will be the majority in little more than 30 years.

“It's very significant,” says Lisa Skriloff, president of Multicultural Marketing Resources. “It's like a stamp of approval for one of the most outstanding family (entertainment) companies to say this is important.”

Tiana, whose story will come to the big screen later this year in the animated musical *The Princess and the Frog*, is the first princess introduced by Disney since Mulan in 1998.

Disney executives say that they did not set out to make a social statement.

“It was much more about the storytelling,” says Kathy Franklin, vice president, global studio franchise development for Disney Consumer Products. “This was not about a conscious decision to say we need an African-American princess.”

Yet, industry watchers say that when Princess Tiana dolls hit stores in the fall, they will bring diversity to a marketplace where it's been sorely lacking.

“I think we're going to see more ... in boys' toys as well as girls', and it's important that we do,” says Ira Mayer, publisher of *The Licensing Letter*, a trade publication. Mattel, which has the license to create the Princess Tiana dolls, is planning to release its own line of black dolls in September. Part of the Barbie family, the So In Style dolls are being touted as having a more authentic appearance, from their hair to their varying skin tones.

Disney, which has had great success with its Princess franchise, predicts that sales will surge with the arrival of Tiana.

“We expect our sales of Princess Tiana products to be significant, and not just to African-American households,” says Franklin.

As with her fellow princesses, Tiana merchandise will range from Halloween costumes to backpacks. There are plans for Tiana-theme MP3 players and digital cameras to be in stores by the end of the year, and a line of Princess Tiana and *The Princess and the Frog* books will go on sale this fall.