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(54) **COMBINATION HAND PUPPET AND SPORTS BALL**

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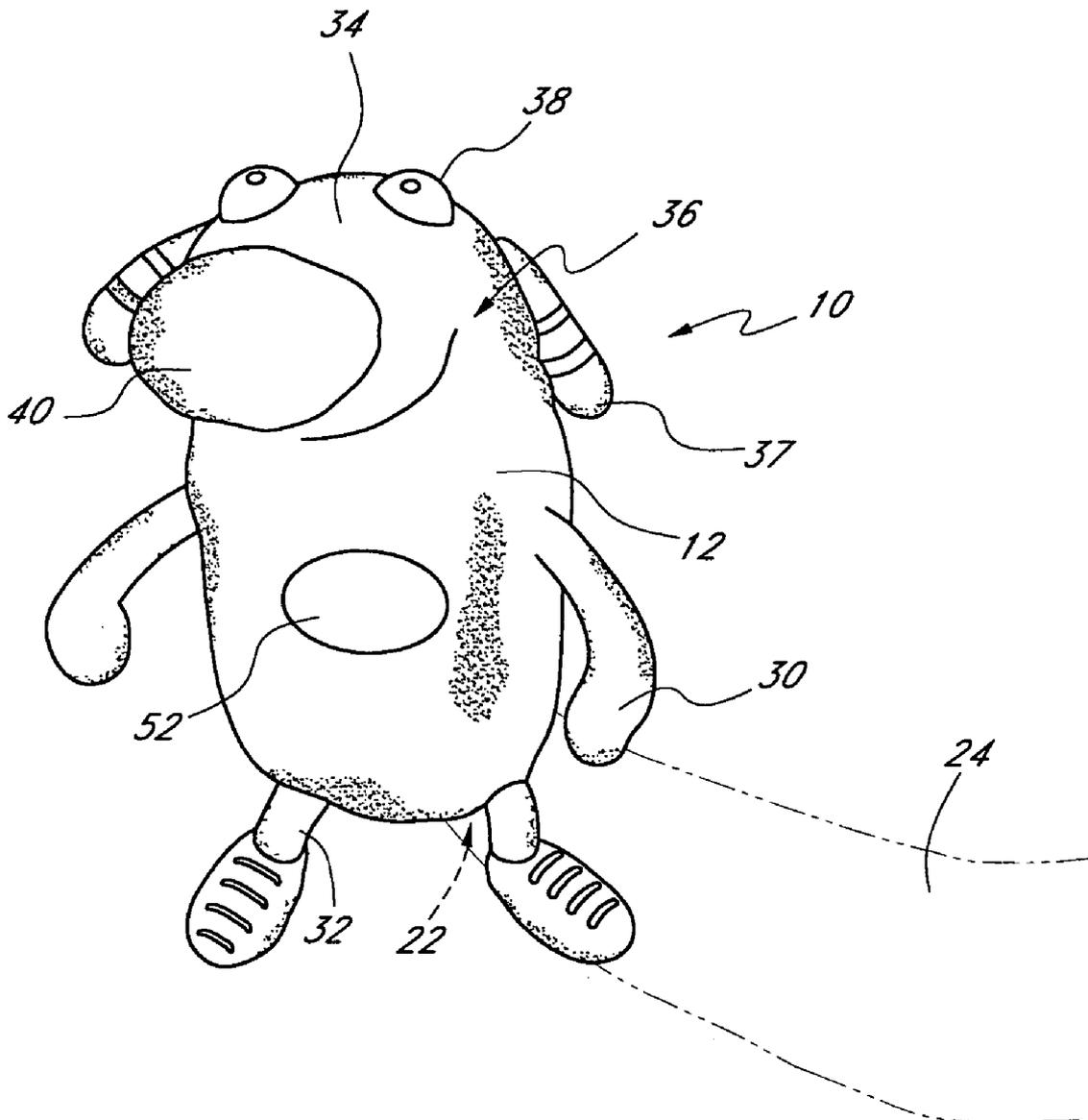
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(57) **ABSTRACT**

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A plush toy is reversible between a first configuration in which the toy resembles a sports ball, and a second configuration in which the toy is a hand puppet. In the second configuration, the toy comprises an opening at a lower portion thereof for receiving a user's hand. The opening can be configured to allow the user to control one or more facial or other features of the puppet.

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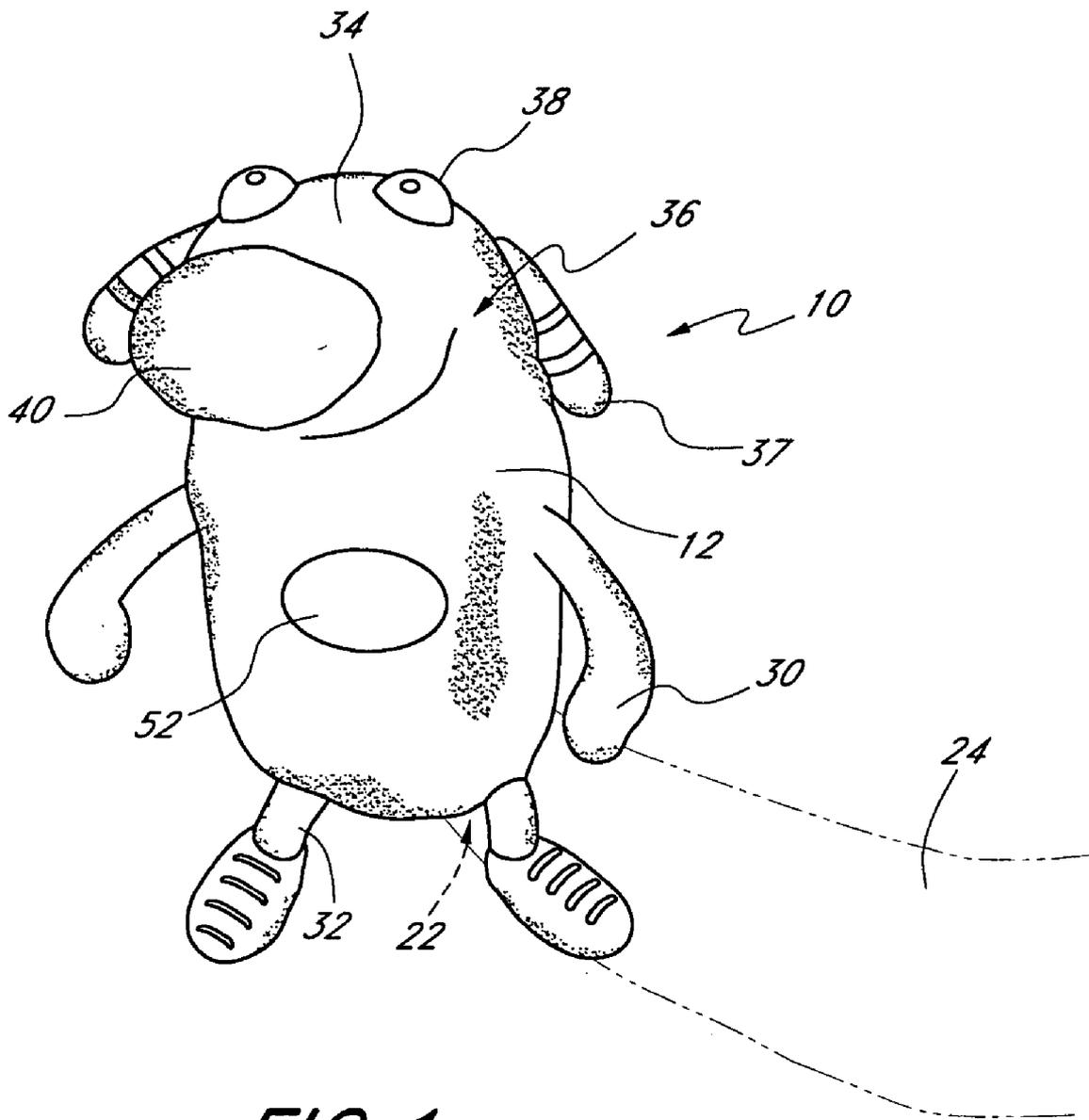


FIG. 1

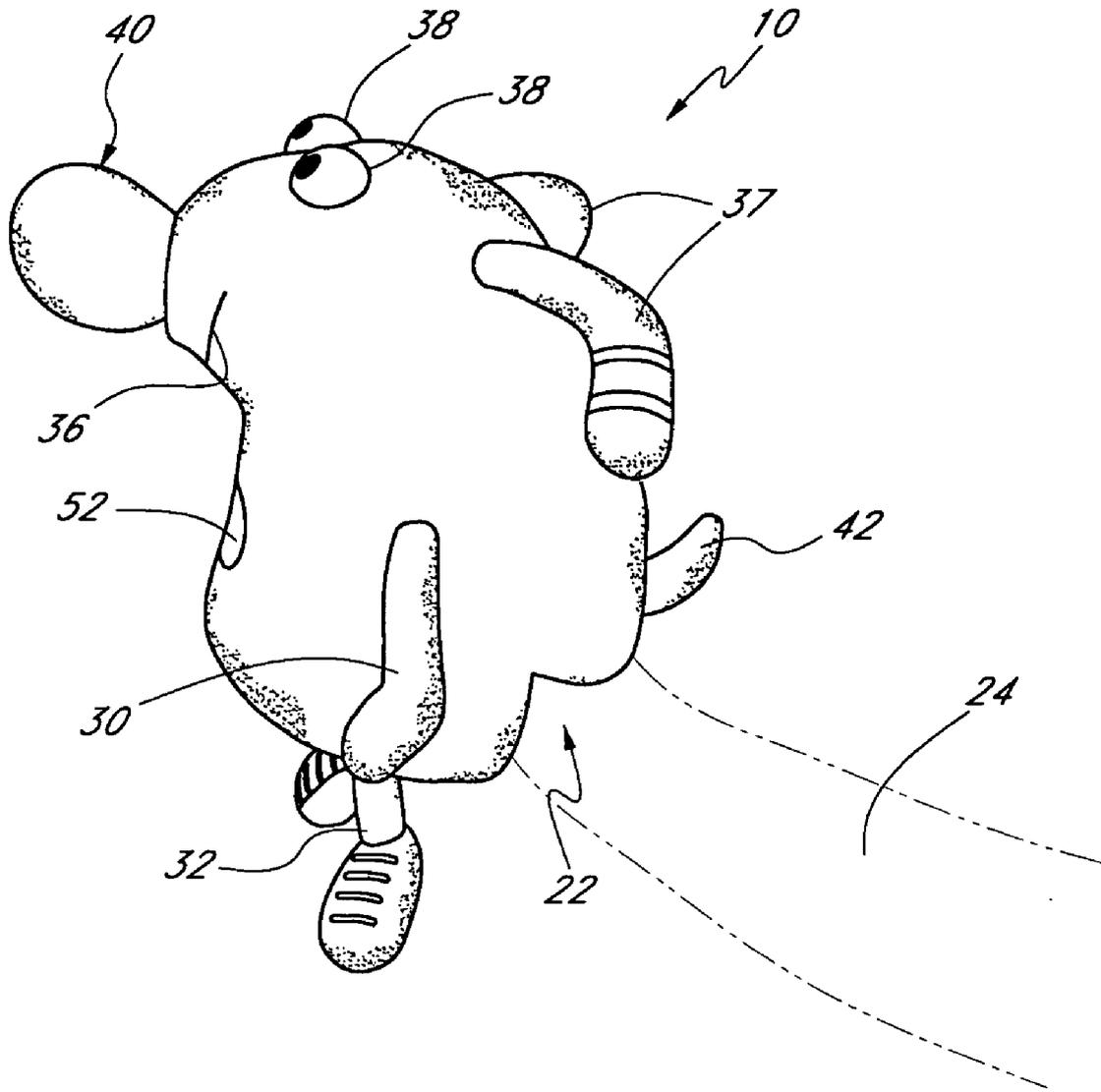
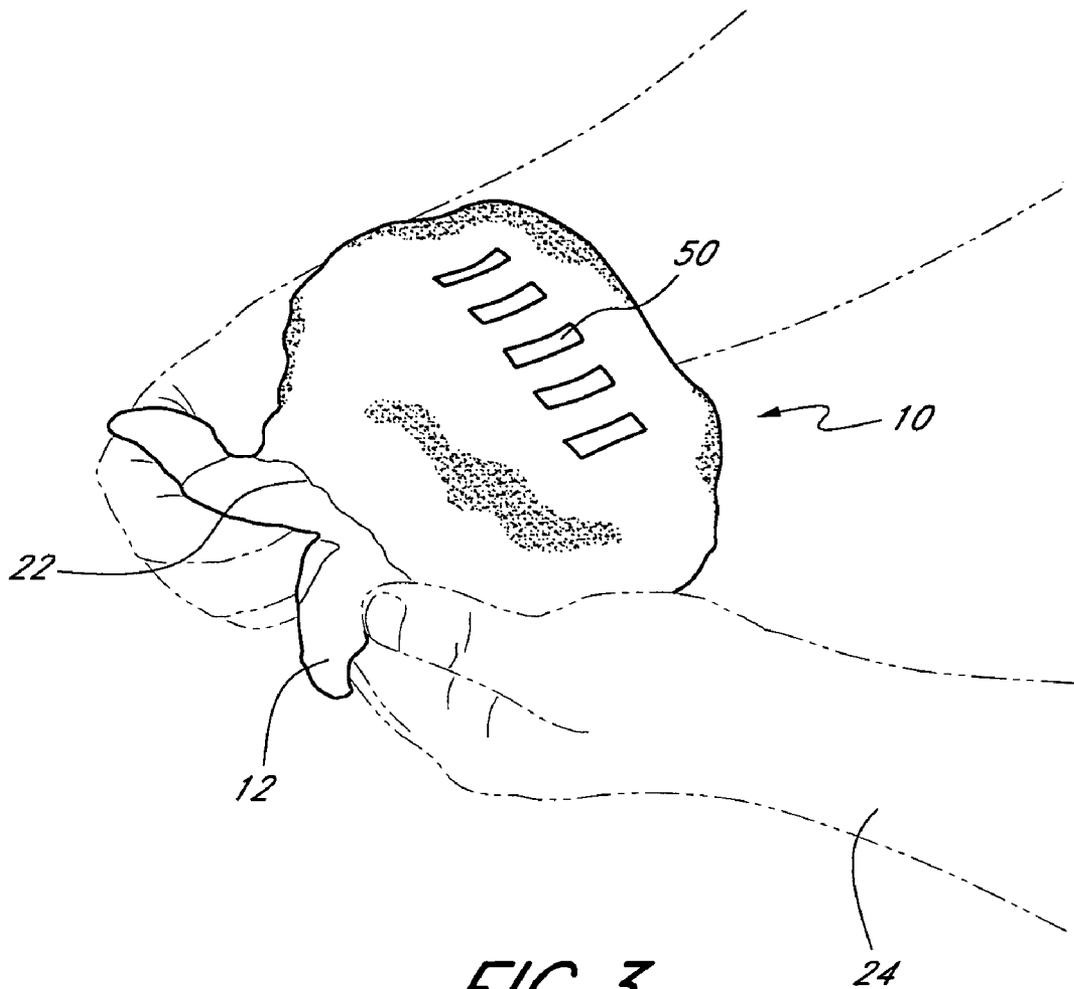


FIG. 2



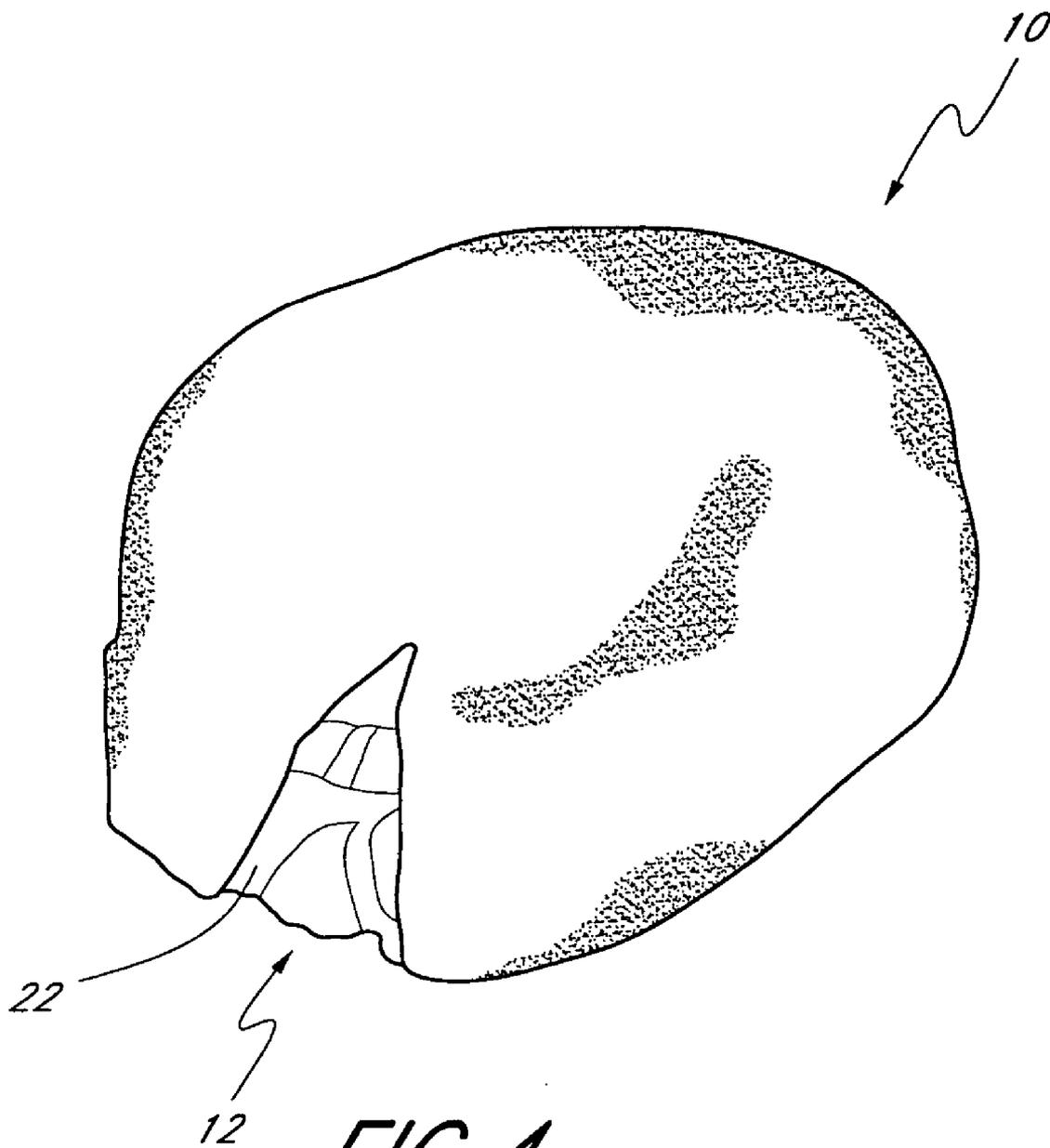


FIG. 4

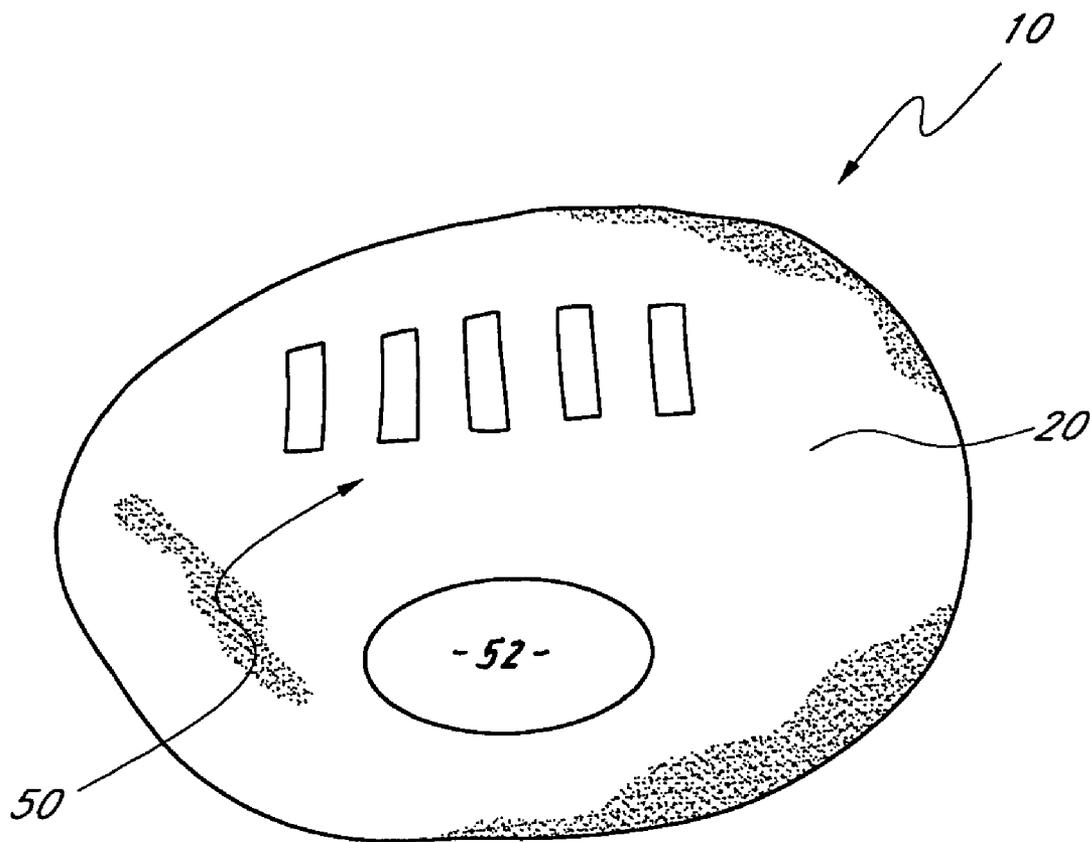


FIG. 5

COMBINATION HAND PUPPET AND SPORTS BALL

BACKGROUND

[0001] 1. Field of the Invention

[0002] The invention relates in general to the field of toys, and in particular to a reversible hand puppet/sports ball.

[0003] 2. Description of the Related Art

[0004] Many toys, such as dolls and stuffed animals, are formed of cloth, fabric and stuffing materials. Some soft plush toys have been developed which are convertible or changeable from one shape or form to another. There remains room for further improvements and developments in these types of toys.

SUMMARY

[0005] In one embodiment, a plush toy is provided that is reversible between a first configuration in which the toy resembles a sports ball, and a second configuration in which the toy is a hand puppet. In the second configuration, the toy comprises an opening at a lower portion thereof for receiving a user's hand. The opening can be configured to allow the user to control one or more facial or other features of the puppet.

[0006] In another embodiment, a toy comprises a reversible fabric article having a first configuration in which a first fabric surface of the article is positioned on an exterior of the article. The first fabric surface is decorated to resemble a sports ball. The article has a second configuration wherein the article assumes the shape of a puppet, and wherein the first fabric surface is positioned on an interior of the article. The puppet has an opening at a lower portion of the article. The opening is sized to receive a hand of a user therein, and is configured to allow a user to control features of the puppet.

[0007] In another embodiment, a combination hand puppet and sports ball comprises a sewn fabric article arranged in a shape of a puppet having a head, a body, arms, legs and an opening configured to receive a user's hand. The opening is located at a lower portion of the puppet, and comprises portions configured to allow a user to control at least one of the head, arms and legs of the puppet via the opening. The article is further configured to be turned inside-out to an inverted position such that an interior surface of the opening surrounds the article. In the inverted position, the article is configured to resemble a sports ball.

[0008] A method of using a toy is also provided. The method comprises acquiring a plush toy in a shape resembling a sports ball and having an opening in a portion thereof. The method is continued by inverting the toy by moving interior portions of the toy to the exterior such that the toy assumes a shape of a hand puppet upon inverting. One can then operate the hand puppet by inserting a hand into the opening and manipulating at least one feature of the puppet.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF DRAWINGS

[0009] Having thus summarized the general nature of the invention, certain preferred embodiments and modifications thereof will become apparent to those skilled in the art from the detailed description herein having reference to the figures that follow, of which:

[0010] **FIG. 1** is a perspective view of one embodiment of a hand puppet/sports ball toy shown in the hand puppet configuration on a wearer's hand;

[0011] **FIG. 2** is a side perspective view of the toy of **FIG. 1**;

[0012] **FIG. 3** is an illustration of a user inverting the toy of **FIG. 1** into a sports ball shape;

[0013] **FIG. 4** is an illustration of the toy of **FIG. 2** converted mostly into a sports ball with a portion of the puppet still visible;

[0014] **FIG. 5** is an illustration of the toy in a sports ball configuration.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

[0015] With reference to **FIGS. 1-5**, embodiments of a combination hand puppet and sports ball will now be described. In general, embodiments of a toy **10** as described herein can be configured to be changed from a shape of a stuffed animal/hand puppet shape **12** (e.g. **FIG. 1**) to a shape of a sports ball **20** (e.g. **FIG. 5**). In the first configuration, the hand puppet **12** comprises an opening **22** at a lower portion of the puppet **12** in order to allow a user **24** to operate the puppet. The puppet **12** can be provided with various features which can be controlled by a user's hand from within the opening **22**.

[0016] In some embodiments, the puppet **12** can include various features that can be controlled by a user's hand from within the opening **22**. In some embodiments, such features can include the character's arms **30**, legs **32**, head **34**, mouth **36**, ears **37**, eyes **38**, nose **40**, tail **42**, etc. In some embodiments, specific portions of the opening **22** can be configured to provide control of these features. For example, the arms **30**, legs **32**, mouth **36**, etc. can include hollow cavities into which a user **24** can insert a finger (or fingers) to control those features. In further embodiments, the features could include substantially rigid, or semi-rigid elements extending through a feature (such as an arm or leg) that can be engaged by a user's finger simply by pressing against an interior surface within the opening **22**. It is generally advantageous to provide the puppet with as many manipulable features as possible. In general, more manipulable features make for a more personified puppet, which can increase a child's interest in the puppet.

[0017] In the embodiment illustrated in **FIGS. 1 and 2**, the hand puppet **12** is in the shape of a caricatured dog. In alternative embodiments, the hand puppet can be formed in the shape of other animals, such as "realistic" or caricatured representations of other dogs, cats, people, or any other animal or object.

[0018] The toy **10** is generally configured such that it can be turned inside-out to form a shape of a sports ball. **FIGS. 3 and 4** illustrate an embodiment of a toy being turned inside-out from a "dog" shape to a "sports ball" shape. In the

illustrated embodiment, the sports ball **20** is configured to resemble a football. To accomplish the appearance of a football, the toy can be provided with "laces"**50**, seams, brown or tan coloring, etc. In alternative embodiments, the toy **10** can be configured to resemble other sports balls when inverted from the hand-puppet configuration. For example, the toy **10** can be configured to resemble a baseball, basketball, hockey puck, water polo ball, soccer ball, volleyball, etc. by providing appropriate coloring, lines, seams and features.

[0019] In some embodiments, the toy can **10** include a closure mechanism for closing the opening **22** in the sports ball configuration **20**. Any suitable closure mechanism, such as zippers, buttons, snaps, hook-and-loop closures and others can be used as desired. In other embodiments, the toy **10** does not include any closure mechanism at the opening. In one embodiment, a feature of the ball, such as a seam or lacing, etc. can be aligned with the opening so as to substantially hide the opening in the feature of the ball.

[0020] In some embodiments, the toy **10** can bear an emblem **52** with a name or logo of a sports team, a player, or any other identifying information. Such emblems can be configured to be visible in either or both of the sports ball **20** and the puppet **12** configurations. Additionally, in some embodiments, the puppet **12** can be arranged to wear a uniform of a sports team in a sport associated with the ball in the ball configuration. Thus, for example, in the illustrated embodiment, the puppet **12** is shown wearing a uniform of a football team, and the toy is convertible into a shape of a football **20**.

[0021] Embodiments of a toy as described herein can be made of many suitable fabrics and materials. For example, the outer surfaces of the toy can comprise felt, cotton, linen, wool, nylon, spandex, or any other natural or synthetic material. In some embodiments, emblems **52** are patches sewn onto the toy, while in other embodiments, the emblems are dyed or printed directly on the material of the toy. In some embodiments, portions of the toy can also be stuffed with cotton batting, synthetic fiber fills, or other suitable stuffing materials as desired. Any additional materials can also be used as desired. In some embodiments, the puppets limbs can be stuffed to be sufficiently rigid to retain a normal shape without the need for a user's hand within the opening. Thus, in the puppet configuration **12**, the toy can also be used as a stuffed animal without a user's hand in the opening.

[0022] Although certain embodiments and examples have been described herein, it will be understood by those skilled in the art that many aspects of the methods and devices shown and described in the present disclosure may be differently combined and/or modified to form still further embodiments. Additionally, it will be recognized that the methods described herein may be practiced using any device suitable for performing the recited steps. Such alternative embodiments and/or uses of the methods and devices described above and obvious modifications and equivalents thereof are intended to be within the scope of the present disclosure. Thus, it is intended that the scope of the present invention should not be limited by the particular embodiments described above, but should be determined only by a fair reading of the claims that follow.

What is claimed is:

1. A toy comprising:

a reversible fabric article having a first configuration in which a first fabric surface of the article is positioned on an exterior of the article, the first fabric surface being decorated to resemble a sports ball,

the article having a second configuration wherein the article assumes the shape of a puppet and wherein the first fabric surface is positioned on an interior of the article, the puppet having an opening at a lower portion of the article, the opening being sized to receive a hand of a user therein, and being configured to allow a user to control at least one feature of the puppet.

2. The toy of claim 1, wherein the opening includes a portion extending into a feature of the puppet.

3. The toy of claim 1, wherein the feature comprises at least one member of the group consisting of arm, leg, ear, nose, mouth, tail, and eye.

4. The toy of claim 1, wherein the opening does not include a closure mechanism.

5. The toy of claim 1, further comprising a first emblem positioned on a front portion of the puppet and a second emblem on an outer surface of the ball.

6. A combination hand puppet and sports ball toy comprising:

a sewn fabric article arranged in a shape of a puppet having a head, a body, arms, legs and an opening configured to receive a user's hand, the opening being located at a lower portion of the puppet, the opening comprising portions configured to allow a user to control at least one of the head, arms and legs of the puppet via the opening;

wherein the article is further configured to be turned inside-out to an inverted position such that an interior surface of the opening surrounds the article, wherein, in the inverted position, the article is configured to resemble a sports ball.

7. The toy of claim 6, wherein portions of the article comprise a stuffing material therein.

8. The toy of claim 6, wherein the article comprises an emblem on an outer portion thereof in at least one of the puppet configuration or the sports ball configuration.

9. A method of using a toy, the method comprising:

acquiring a plush toy in a shape resembling a sports ball and having an opening in a portion thereof;

inverting the toy by moving interior portions of the toy to the exterior, wherein the toy assumes the shape of a hand puppet upon said inverting;

operating said hand puppet by inserting a hand into said opening and manipulating at least one feature of the puppet.

10. The method of claim 9, wherein the feature comprises at least one member of the group consisting of arm, leg, ear, nose, mouth, tail, and eye.

11. The method of claim 9, further comprising providing a first emblem positioned on a front portion of the puppet and a second emblem on an outer surface of the ball.