

John Migliore
CAML Final Assignment
Profs. Howard Besser and Antonia Lant
May 4, 2009

Since the advent of recorded history, toys have been a critical part not only of childhood, with what appear to be crude games found in early archeological digs, but of commerce, politics and the larger society in general. At the same time, they've served as both entertainment options and educational tools for children, as well as anyone who retains fond memories of childhood (which is to say, hopefully, most of us.) And, as with all historical artifacts, they hold a mirror up to the issues and obsessions of the time in which they were created.

Although I've been able to find frustratingly little on this aspect of its history, New York City was once a thriving center of toy and novelty manufacturing. This is still somewhat true today, as a cursory Internet search reveals a few toy-related factories still operating in the outer reaches of Brooklyn, but not to the degree in which such concerns flourished for roughly a 100-year period between the 1850s and 1950s. It was during this era, in 1870, that a small, innocuous toy shop opened on lower Fifth Avenue, which in time would become the fabled F.A.O. Schwartz, repository of a million toy-related dreams.

The history and meaning of toys was treated in very different ways at two institutions, one of which I visited, with the other being attended virtually through its website and a phone call.

The Museum of the City of New York has over 10,000 toys in its collection. In keeping with its once exclusive Upper Fifth Avenue address on Museum Mile, many of these are playthings owned by prominent New Yorkers. Many of these items are showcased in an ongoing permanent exhibition, New York Toy Stories.

The centerpiece of the holdings is the Stettheimer Dollhouse. Created by and for Carrie Stettheimer, one of three well-known New York society siblings (her sister Florrie was an artist of some

note), the dollhouse is a meticulous recreation of the family home, Alwyn Court, as it looked during the 1920s, although it took two decades to complete. One great difference between the real thing and the model is that the artworks are miniature recreations of their most famous works by artists whom the Stettheimers knew. Marcel Duchamp painted a tiny “Nude Descending A Staircase” to hang above the main staircase of the recreation, while Gaston Lachaise contributed a statue to the Mediterranean courtyard. The museum also retains a collection of dollhouses which take up much of the rest of another room in the exhibit, with the earliest being Ann Anthony’s Pavilion, dating from 1769. Perhaps the most impressive from a New York architectural standpoint is the Goelet townhouse, faithfully recreating an entire brownstone. Almost without exception, all the dollhouses represent doppelgangers of a family manse, created so that members of the clan could, in what seems a bizarre meta-experience, admire a copy of the home which they had built and were likely still living in. Based on the visitors present during my time there, today the displays enthrall a roughly equal proportion of small children and dollhouse aficionados.

The dollhouse receives its own section in the display along with a large wall card detailing its history and that of the Stettheimer family. In this, it is different from most of the other items in the on-display toy collection, for which patrons are given relatively minimal background information. There is always a placard containing the name of each toy, the year or era of its creation, the manufacturer and its owner (if known). Some items do have slightly more information, usually a card about the personalities, historical happenings or social movements they echo. This is particularly the case with what I would term “games of progress”. These are board games created during the 1880s, utilizing “up from their bootstraps” scenarios exemplifying the heyday of Horatio Alger, the immigrant experience and early progressive politics. One game features globetrotting reporter Nellie Bly, with the goal being to guide her on her travels around the world, hopefully without mishap. Another is titled “Rise of the Messenger Boy” in which one’s goal is to rise from the impecunious position of the title to ownership of

a company. Other less sociologically grounded toys include teddy bears and assorted dolls (including a full set of the Dionne quintuplets, gazing creepily out from their basket), puppets, robots, home audiovisual toys including mini-projectors, praxinoscopes and zoetropes, and cast-iron and tin soldiers.

The museum's purpose, as with its other exhibitions, is to explain and explore the history of New York City. Each item is exhibited in standard museum fashion, enclosed in a Plexiglas case with an identifying card of some sort. There is no physical interaction between any of the toys and museum visitors. This is understandable given the age, fragility and rarity of many of the items, but proved hard to explain to at least a couple of the younger visitors there during my stay, who naturally wanted to examine some of the collection pieces more closely. Although its mission is not solely to cater to children, it does seem strange that the museum does not offer some way in which children could learn about and interact with some of the toys, perhaps through reproductions or "non-display" versions of some items. (For instance, one of the items carefully displayed behind plexiglass is a Slinky, another of which would not be difficult to obtain.) There are workshops and events which allow educators to become more acquainted with the toy collection, but as far as I can tell, none for one of the exhibit's major target audience, though the museum gift shop seems to do a brisk business in coloring books, one of which focuses on New York toys.

Since the museum's mission is primarily rooted in historical focus, the relative paltriness of most of the information (outside of that on the Stettheimer dollhouse, which is quite complete) seems puzzling. While the exhibition is definitely worth visiting if one has children, is a toy hobbyist or enjoys various aspects of New York history, the items as presented do not seem to be serving their audience as completely as they might.

The same cannot be said of my second institution, whose difference is readily apparent even in its name. The Please Touch museum is located in Philadelphia's Memorial Hall, an historic 1876 building which the museum recently moved into at least partially with funds from the city. In contrast to the

situation at the Museum of the City of New York, the museum is meant almost entirely to be an immersive, tactile experience. One part of the institution consists of themed play and learning areas for children, meant to provide an immersive experience fomenting creativity and learning. These include, among others, City Capers, where children can run various businesses and “work” at assorted jobs; Flight Fantasy, where kids can simulate flying, rowing or “playing hopscotch on a cloud”; Wonderland, an area recreating Alice In Wonderland where they can don costumes and attend such activities as the Mad Hatter’s Tea Party and Roadside Attractions, where small visitors can build cars, trucks and other vehicles while also running a garage. Each area also contains special sections designed for toddlers.

The heart of the museum’s collection, however, lies in the over 12,000 toys it holds. In contrast to MCNY’s collection, which skews older, most items are post-1945, encompassing everything from enduring baby boomer classics such as Etch-A-Sketch, Lite-Brite, Barbie and the original Betty Crocker Easy-Bake Oven in an alarming shade of avocado green; classic games including Candy Land and Chutes and Ladders (generally in several versions); and toys that are both historical and current, such as Transformers. Approximately 20% of the collection is on display at any given time. If possible, providing that there are backups in the collection or the toy is easy to replace, the institution will allow children to play with some of the toys.

Please Touch also has a series of regularly scheduled recurring and one-time events to involve the larger community, including an upcoming Story Book Costume Ball. Most striking and extremely unusual, as far as I’m aware for a museum or similar institution, they offer a four-year program for high-school students designed to develop an “expertise in public speaking, time management, presentation planning and preparation through research driven projects” with the goal of preparing students for college success. There’s also a creative parenting program for teens which the museum has created to complement an initiative in Philadelphia schools. I’m unaware of any other museum offering this sort of public outreach, in combination with lighter social events.

In sum, these museums, while enticing somewhat similar audiences and having a somewhat similar purview from a historical standpoint, embrace radically different approaches to the toys in their collections. At MCNY, the toys serve an entirely historical purpose and are treated as objects to be set on display and admired, without further connection on the part of their audience. For Please Touch, the visitors are an integral part of the museum's function on all fronts, extending to use of the collection holdings and their community outreach utilizing the items is far more extensive than that at MCNY, which runs on an extremely traditional model of the museum as repository. Taken together, they provide intriguing examples of how items rarely meant to be more than mere playthings can be studied, interpreted and used in a museum setting.