

Playthings of the Past

Dollhouses

Dollhouses have been popular for centuries but in the early years were rare and so expensive that only the wealthiest could afford them. The first known example was built for a Bavarian Duke, Albert V, in the 16th century. Albert called this his “baby house” because it was an exact replica of his own house, custom-made for him by a German craftsman. Albert’s aristocratic guests were so impressed that they commissioned craftsmen to make miniature replicas of their own homes complete. The homes soon became a measure of taste, wealth and social standing.

The houses were painstakingly produced by hand and were elaborately furnished with miniature versions of not only furniture but also paintings, tapestries and carpets, all generally to scale. Even full kitchen furnishings were reproduced, from teakettles to china dishes. Although considered a toy, the dollhouse usually occupied a place of honor within the home and children were expected to admire it, touching it only rarely and quite carefully.

During the 19th century, dollhouses and their furnishings began to be produced in factories and prices dropped to the point where most families could afford to own one. During this time, children began to really play with the houses and young girls learned the basics of creating and managing the perfect household as they decorated and furnished their dollhouses.

Germany produced the best and most highly-prized dollhouses throughout the 19th century. There were also English and American manufacturers, and some local carpenters continued to produce one-of-a-kind houses. With the coming of World War I, the supply of German houses was cut off, giving American companies a chance to corner the local market.

There were some stylistic differences in dollhouses. For example, while all dollhouses have elaborate front facades, British models tended to have a hinged front that opened to reveal the interior while American houses usually had an open back that provided access to the rooms. There were no standards for the size of the houses or furnishings but, by the early 20th century, a scale of 1 inch to 1 foot had become common.

Dollhouses reflect the architectural styles of the time in which they were produced. In the early 19th century, dollhouses depicted farm houses or large country homes. Later in the century, the Queen Anne and Italianate styles were popular, as were townhouses similar to those in large American cities. In the 20th century, dollhouses were designed as split-level and ranch style houses like those found in American suburbs. In the years after World War II, manufacturers adapted factories, techniques and materials, developed during the war, to the production of toys. Lithographed sheet metal, plastic and fiberboard became the materials of choice.



Dollhouse, early 1900s *Dollhouse, early 1900s*
American Wood

Gift of Katharine P. Porter, 94.4.1, American Wood

Like many toys, this dollhouse appears to have been played with by multiple generations of children. The floor in the attic is made of modern particle board, not the wood used for the other floors, and the walls and floor of the bathroom are cardboard from a later period. The hinging of the roof may have been done later to allow access to the rooms in the attic. The back of this house is solid, with no doors or windows.

Doll Carriage, c. 1870
Possibly Baltimore, Md.
Wood, steel



Gift of Barbara Crapster-Pregont, 91.42.24

English architect William Kent is credited with inventing the baby carriage in 1733 when he built one for the children of the third Duke of Devonshire. At first they were novelties popular with wealthy families but they quickly evolved into a way for parents of average means to transport their children. Soon, miniature versions were being produced for girls to transport their dolls. This doll carriage belonged to Ellen Bruce Fleming Neely, the donor's grandmother.

Rocking Horse, 1875-1890
American
Wood; leather
Gift of Victor Weybright, 1967



Most of the early rocking horses were made by local carpenters or cabinetmakers. They were simply constructed of a horse cut from a wood plank, painted and mounted on a pair of curved rockers. By the mid-1800s, factory-made versions were available. These featured leather ears, real horsehair manes and tails, leather stirrups and padded seats. The most expensive models had bodies covered with real horsehide, rather than being painted. In the 1860s, Crandall's, a New York toy company, introduced a horse which was mounted on springs attached to a solid platform. This design provided a thrilling ride but was almost impossible to tip over.

The spring-mounted horse seen here was a favorite toy of Victor Weybright and his twin sister, Victoria, who lived on Hollow Rock Farm, near Terra Rubra. Victor Weybright was an amateur historian who authored a book about Francis Scott Key entitled *Spangled Banner*.

Child's Farm Wagon, 1920s
American
Wood, iron



Gift of Doris Herbst, in memory of Viola Crissinger Robertson & Lillian Crissinger Little, 2006.5.1

Wagons such as this were exact replicas of full-size farm wagons. This model was sold by Sears, Roebuck and Company and was their best-selling wagon from 1910 through 1920. The seats, sides and tailgate were removable to allow children to create different wagon styles to play with. These wagons were usually pulled by goats or dogs. This wagon belonged to Viola and Lillian, the daughters of John and Marie Crissinger of New Windsor.

Pedal Car, c.1953
American
Steel, rubber
Gift of Robert Alan Erb, 2000.28.1



Pedal car production in the U.S. began in the 1920s. During the 1920s and 1930s, however, the cars were expensive and few families could afford them, so few cars were produced. In the years following World War II, factories that had produced equipment for the military retooled for the production of consumer goods. As the manufacturing of automobiles boomed in the 1950s, so did the production of pedal

cars. Among the most popular styles were fire engines, tractors, racecars and airplanes. Some models resembled real automobiles and companies such as Coca-Cola, Texaco and John Deere licensed the production of limited-edition vehicles that featured their logos. The donor, a Westminster native, received this car as a Christmas present when he was a little boy. Later, his younger sister and daughter also played with the car.

To see these and many other toys from the Historical Society's collection, visit the Playthings of the Past exhibition in the exhibit gallery in Cockey's, 216 East Main Street Westminster. The exhibit runs through the end of June 2012.

Gallery hours are 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m., Tuesday through Saturday.

More more information on the Society's toy collection, visit the [Childhood Playthings exhibit page](#).