

construct their identities through material goods. Moreover it can bring all three elements of making, marketing and using together. And the study of manners can link the history of power, social and political history.

As a whole, the conference was a good one both because of what it did and what it failed to do. We did get a good feel for what the shape of the field of *American* material culture looked like from one perspective. But it may be time to break away from case studies and attempt a synthesis since the whole may be greater than the sum of its parts. Perhaps then it will have the impact that Carson says is missing from the

mainstream of scholarship. We also need a better sense of how the study of material culture is approached by other disciplines – their theories and findings – and by non-Americans. Styles's comments made it clear that British scholarship has a very different orientation. So does Canada, as was apparent in the book, edited by Gerald Pocius, *Living in a Material World: Canadian and American Approaches to Material Culture* (St. John's, Newfoundland, 1991). And finally, we must heed Upton's challenge to develop new ways to move beyond the object to capture the dynamic condition of human life.

## Childhood – Playtime?

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*A review of an international symposium on the research and documentation in museums of the cultural aspects of toys, children and youth, Cologne, Germany, June 21–23, 1993.*

The old adage that refers to play as the work of the child was the underlying inspiration for an international symposium of academics, museum workers and educators, which took place in Cologne, Germany, in June 1993. A varied range of interests brought approximately 50 participants from 14 countries to the three-day event. These interests included a curiosity about the meaning of play, a desire to know more about the role of playthings in learning or to explore the ways in which children and childhood can be interpreted, an appreciation of toys and games and a concern to attract and to engage young museum clients. A limited enrolment, a tight schedule of papers and tours, and the setting (a small but efficient conference hotel) ensured that all participants remained focused on the symposium's subject matter.

Twenty-one papers were presented on the themes "Childhood-Research and Presentation in Museums," "Toys-Research and Presentation in Museums," "Problems of Presenting Childhood in Museums" and "Children, Youth and the Museum." While many of the papers appealed to material historians, several of them stood out as particularly interesting. Michel Manson from the Musée National de l'Éduca-

tion at Rouen, France, reported on an extensive program of collection development and research at his museum. The program departs dramatically from the connoisseurship that is so prevalent in Europe by linking the collected objects to historical records found in archives. The result is a history of toys that spans four centuries and shows how toys shaped their users.

Rooksana Omar from the Local History Museum in Durban, South Africa, described the efforts of two economically deprived children who sought to imitate the toys of middle-class children by re-creating them out of readily available materials. One child ultimately became an artist depicting children's playthings, and the other achieved renown as a folk-toy maker. The stories of both these young men reflect the pervasiveness of white, bourgeois material culture while at the same time demonstrate how culture can be modified by race and economic status.

One particularly poignant paper was presented by Gudrun Volk of the Deutsches Spielzeugmuseum at Sonneberg, Germany. It dealt with the living conditions of the families who produced the lovely dolls that once graced comfortable homes around the world and that are now prized objects in museum holdings and private collections. A day's labour on the part of a whole family earned enough to purchase a pound of butter; 70 doll bodies were worth about a one-pound loaf of bread. The

resulting malnutrition and illiteracy made the children of Sonneberg among the poorest in Germany at the beginning of this century. Thus, as we saw late last summer with the toy-factory fire in Thailand, the material history of a toy when its whole life cycle is considered may deny children their childhood, playtime and enrichment.

Another topic that cut across the conference themes was war. Several papers addressed the issue, either as a matter for interpretation by museums or as an element reflected in the toys and games in museum collections. Rainer Korte, Professor of Education from Dortmund, Germany, studies games and has assembled a collection of 4 000 that incorporates various subject matter. He has found that games inject an important element into a serious-minded society, such as Germany, by teaching how conflicts can be resolved and how people can work together. In that context, he argues that war is an inappropriate subject for games and its use is "tasteless."

In the former Soviet Union, on the other hand, war toys were popular and the Red Army was portrayed as a positive role model. Likewise in Germany in previous eras, war was glorified. The difference between the two countries, according to B-H. Christiansen of the Städtisches Museum in Salzgitter, Germany, is that German museums now ignore war toys and the subject of war. Their collections fail to reflect what the stores offered to the young. This shortcoming pre-empts the opportunity to portray the consequences of militarism and war.

This German reticence about militarism was also mentioned by Michael Faber, the organizer of the symposium and Head of Education and Public Relations at the Rheinisches Freilichtmuseum, the host institution. Their exhibit of toys deliberately seeks to raise the issue of war and militarism and to show the consequences of war on an individual level. While this aspect of the exhibit is a small part of the whole, it is regarded as a courageous venture by the museum.

Similar presentations are considered to be most apt by Karl-Josef Pazzini, Professor of Aesthetic Education at Lüneburg University. Using a well-edited video, he documented aggression in nature and in humans to establish that aggressiveness is an intrinsic part of

humankind's make-up. A problem exists, however, because this aggressiveness no longer conforms to society's norms. By ignoring the subject, museums contribute to a process that denies the reality of aggression and they miss their chance to channel that aggression in a socially constructive way. Museums also forego the opportunity to establish their relevance to younger visitors.

Three Canadians also participated in the symposium. Loet Vos of the Toronto Museum of Childhood made a lively presentation on ephemeral toys from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It was perhaps the meeting's best illustrated paper because Vos brought with her an array of small, informal playthings that figure prominently in children's lives but that are widely overlooked by museum curators. Sandra Morton Weizman provided information about the developmental process of the "Growing up in Western Canada" exhibit being planned at the Glenbow Museum in Calgary. The emphasis on consultation with community groups as well as experts was a novel approach for many participants and was widely praised. David Gray and I presented an overview of historical research and museum interpretations of Canadian toys, in which we observed that research is not extensive, that collecting by museums is not particularly active and that interpretation in the museum setting often appears to be superficial. Comments suggested that the situation in Canada parallels situations elsewhere, including Germany and Scandinavia.

One of the purposes of the symposium was to secure the study of childhood and playthings by establishing an international organization to foster it. Enthusiasm for the idea was not as high among the participants as the symposium's organizers. After some discussion, a committee was created to form a network of interested people and to perhaps organize a follow-up event. The co-ordinator is Sandra Morton Weizman, and other members come from France, Hungary, Germany and, tentatively, South Africa. In any event, the proceedings of the symposium are to be published.

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