

Playthings from the past

Those toys you loved so much may be on display in museum

By Susan Thygeson-Aktary
special writer

TOYS, LIKE THE ones now on display at the Detroit Historical Museum most likely were part of the scene around the turn of the century in the George and Ellen Scripps Booth home, the historic Cranbrook House in Bloomfield Hills.

Called "My Favorite Toy," the current exhibition of playthings from the past is made up of some of the museum's own collection and items from the Lawrence Scripps Wilkenson Collection of Toys (LSWCT), an affiliate of the museum.

The exhibition began last Thursday and will run through Feb. 16 at the museum, 5201 Woodward Ave., Detroit. Museum hours are 9:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. Wednesday through Sunday.

Wilkenson is a grand nephew of Ellen Warren Scripps Booth (1884-1948) and great-grandson of newspaper baron James E. Scripps.

"The original concept was to use enlargements of old photographs of children with their favorite toys and provide an example of the type of toy that appears in the photograph," said Cynthia Young, the museum's curator of social history.

"Some of the dolls in the doll case are almost identical to the dolls in the photos," she added, "but we also have many others."

One of the goals of the exhibition is to show how children's playthings can reflect society.

"The oldest toy here dates back to about 1840 — before the industrial revolution," said Lawrence Wilkenson, entrepreneur and famous toy historian and collector.

Wilkenson, the creator of LSWCT, is a partner in an antique jewelry business in Atlanta and an art gallery in Miami.

"This is a very nice Lehmann toy, 'Paak-Pak,'" Wilkenson said, holding a small mallard duck followed by three smaller offspring.

"Another one of the Lehmann toys is a very fine automaton," he added, "like the ones in Berlin around the First World War."

"The earliest mechanical robot made in Japan about 1855 was one of the earliest space toys."

EXPLAINING HOW he happened to become a collector of antique and modern toys, Wilkenson said, "I was a vice president of F.A.O. Schwarz (toy store). In 1982 we were celebrating the centennial of the opening of the first store, and I was responsible for establishing branch stores."

"Our buyers solicited antique toys from around the country, and I took the collection to each branch for its opening celebration. I got hooked on them and now there are 3,000 in the collection."

Said Wilkenson, pointing out antique toys, "This ferris wheel, this rocket ride, and this merry-go-round were all part of a series made by the same company in the 1930s."

"This one was made in 1910, and this one is from just before the Second World War," he said, indicating other items.

"The original Stutz-Bearcat car was made in 1928, and here is a toy version of it. This is a 1929 Packard pedal car that should be restored."

Responded curator Young, "We'd love to do it if we had the money."

Strolling on toward a stuffed animal case, Young added, "We were the beneficiaries of an estate of a former professor at Wayne State University who was a collector of teddy bears. It's on display here, too."

"These two wagons were once used to deliver The Detroit News (whose founder was James E. Scripps) and the Detroit Free Press," Young said.

"Turning to the train case, Wilkenson remarked, 'Lionel manufactured a pastel-colored train for girls once. It was a flop commercially, but now it's a real collector's item. A friend of mine with a good sense of humor painted this one.'"

ALSO PART of the exhibit are old board and table games like the Little Bo Peep by Selchow & Righter, which also created Parcheesi, and Magnetic Fish by McLoughlin Brothers from

about 1891.

Said Wilkenson, "We're going on a multi-city tour through SITES (The Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service) with these 19th- and early 20th-century board games."

Also available at the Detroit exhibition is a Howdy Doody dummy, a variety of dolls and tea sets and some paper doll cut-outs from around 1950.

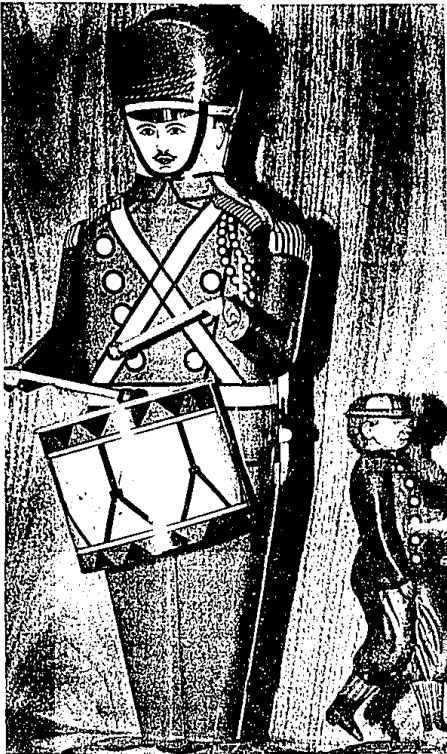
With the help of the Toy Manufacturers' Association in New York, the LSWCT is compiling histories of toy makers in the U.S. and abroad.

"We have information on all the companies that exist now," Wilkenson said. "We even know more about German firms than most everyone in Germany."

Asked how he came to acquire most of his collection, Wilkenson replied, "I buy things at auctions and through dealers. It's hard to find a bargain anymore. Now toys have become quite popular."

LSWCT is a non-profit arts organization consisting of Wilkenson and four associates.

"In the U.S., federal support of the arts is less than in any other country," Wilkenson said. "The LSWCT relies heavily on other sources for its funding."



staff photos by DARY CASKEY/staff photographer

A soldier with a drum stands guard over the "My Favorite Toy" exhibit at the Detroit Historical Museum. The toys will be on display until Feb. 16.

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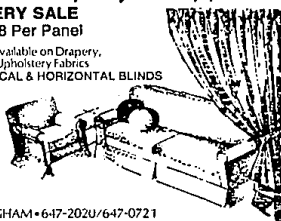
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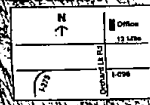
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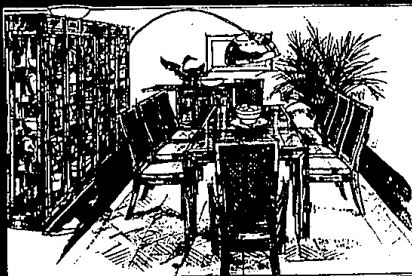


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