



It's Playtime!

Vintage toys taught children to work and play

By Toni Fitzgerald

For almost as long as there have been people, there have been toys. The earliest examples date back thousands of years. Toys were found in Tutankhamun's tomb, and yo-yos are clearly visible on illustrations dotting ancient Greek pottery. "I'm sure cave mothers improvised animal bones and other found objects into toys for their children," said Judith Katz-Schwartz of Twin Brooks Antiques & Collectibles in New York.

Early toys were made out of durable materials that could stand up to rough play, and that often included wood. Wood formed the base for hundreds of popular early children's toys, from building blocks to rocking horses to dollhouses.

These toys often served a purpose beyond merely occupying kids' attention. They were also learning tools. "Almost all toys were 'just like mom's (or dad's),' " Judith noted, "so children could learn to perform the jobs they'd be required to do in adult life."

Toys also helped socialize children, said Jan Foulke, author of the 2011 book *Jan Foulke's Guide to Dolls*. "Fashion dolls were important to show how to dress in a manner approved by society," she said. "Doll-related toys also included washing equipment, irons, ironing boards, tables, dishes, tea sets. All of these helped a child to learn how to set a table, how to serve, polite conversation, etc."

Jan continued, "Dolls involve lots of role playing—pretending to be a nurse or doctor, or a teacher." In that way, toys helped children develop their imaginations through role playing and storytelling, something dolls and, later, action figures were and are particularly helpful with.

Children's education and religious training were also shaped by their toys. Patricia Hogan, a curator at The Strong National Museum of Play, said that wooden Noah's ark sets have stood the test of time. "Many of the first toys that children were given, especially in the 18th and 19th centuries, were religious," she said. "I think that's why the ark has been so popular over a long period of time."

In addition, said Patricia, John Locke, the 17th century British philosopher, encouraged the use of alphabet blocks for teaching children letters and words. "Because of this," she said, "alphabet blocks have a noble association with one of the great thinkers of the Western world."

Most early wooden toys were essentially one of a kind, made especially for the children who played with them. It wasn't until the 1700s, when the toy industry began to develop, that toys became more homogenous.

Because playthings have been passed down through generations, most old toys aren't in good shape today despite their durable materials. "Some have survived in better shape than others. Remember, they've been played with, abused, and even abandoned," said Judith Katz-Schwartz. However, it is still possible to find them. "Everything from ancient primitives to modern toys are available to collectors today," assured Judith.



Wooden alphabet blocks, circa 1920, are similar to those championed by British philosopher John Locke as a learning tool for children.

Photo courtesy of The Strong, Rochester, New York.



Wooden stacking blocks, circa 1920 to 1960, helped children develop fine motor skills through stacking.

Photo courtesy of The Strong, Rochester, New York.

The first wooden rocking horses, like this red one, looked like cradles and were found in the nurseries of wealthy families.

Photo courtesy of The Strong, Rochester, New York.



This 1929 dollhouse was produced by the A. Schoenhut Company of Philadelphia, 12 years after the company first began producing dollhouses in the United States. It is made of wood with a tin roof.

Photo courtesy of The Strong, Rochester, New York.