

Swedish Wooden Toys

At Bard Graduate Center Gallery



NEW YORK CITY — Why are toys habitually ignored in art, history and design circles? Are we inextricably drawn to powerful totems and thus avoid association with the possessions of weaker members of society? Or is it something about the “suspect” emotions these items can provoke in adults? Could it relate to the shadings of the word “toy,” which connote triviality, frivolity and minimal worth? Never fear, clear-eyed and determined scholars associated with the Bard Graduate Center Gallery have stormed the gates of Toyland to identify and offer discourse upon the design, social, cultural and economic ramifications of such artifacts.

*One of the earliest Micki-Kul toys by Georg Aronsson for Micki Leksaker AB, 1944. Micki Leksaker AB, Gemla.
Photo C&S Media, Carl-Johan Nilsson.*





In spite of Sweden's longstanding political neutrality and the Swedish people's widespread pacifist beliefs, military toys were produced. Top, military aircraft, 1928-30. Bottom, military seaplane by Bertil Hegland, 1938.



Like the objects themselves, the title of the exhibition and catalog project is deceptively simple. The co-curators and their colleagues have employed a parade of wooden toys and related paraphernalia to reveal information about Swedish history and culture. Themes include the development of a pedagogy that valued children's interaction with the potent material of wood initially through their playthings and later through manual arts training in woodworking. Also discussed is the awareness of childhood as a special time.

Dollhouse expert Birgitta Lindencrona explores small-scale domestic worlds in her essay, "Dollhouses and Miniatures in Sweden."

This appreciation grew with the expansion of the middle class during the Nineteenth Century and the championing of children's rights at home and internationally via social, labor and educational reform.



*Building set by Gemla Leksaksfabrik, circa 1910-20.
Gemla Leksaksmuseum. Photo C83 Media, Carl-Johan Nilsson.*

*The horse is a revered national symbol in Sweden.
Rocking horse by Gemla Leksaksfabrik AB, 1900.*



How Swedes transformed skis, sleds and other equipment they had commonly used without fanfare into more exciting gear with connotations of healthy recreation, sport, tourism and all-around winter fun is spotlighted as well.

Susan Weber, Bard Graduate Center founder and director, and Amy F. Ogata, professor of art history at the University of Southern California and former professor at Bard Graduate Center (BGC), are the co-curators of the exhibition and the co-editors of the accompanying catalog. This is the first in-depth exhibition of wooden playthings made in Sweden from the Seventeenth through the Twentieth Centuries and showcases nearly 350 objects, images and publications...

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