

Swedish Wooden Toys

September 18, 2015 through January 17, 2016



Bard
Graduate
Center: Decorative
Arts, Design
History, Material
Culture ■ Gallery

Swedish Wooden Toys is the first in-depth study of the history of wooden playthings in Sweden from the seventeenth to the twenty-first centuries. Remarkable doll houses, puzzles and games, pull toys, trains, planes, automobiles, and more will be featured in this colorful exhibition, on view at Bard Graduate Center from September 18, 2015 through January 17, 2016. Although Germany, Japan, and the United States have historically produced and exported the largest numbers of toys worldwide, Sweden has a long and enduring tradition of designing and making wooden toys—from the simplest handmade plaything to more sophisticated forms. This exhibition not only reviews the production of Sweden's toy industries but also explores the practice of handi-craft (*slöjd*), the educational value of wooden playthings, and the vision of childhood that Swedish reformers have promoted worldwide.

Swedish Wooden Toys is curated by 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.

Background

The modern concept of childhood emerged in Europe during the seventeenth century, when the period from infancy to puberty became recognized as a distinct stage in human development. As the status of childhood gained in social importance, children acquired their own material goods. Special furniture, such as cribs and feeding chairs, and amusements, including rattles and dolls, became increasingly common in elite and middle-class European households. The notion of the innocent child who learned through play was fully established by the middle of the eighteenth century, and toys began to gain importance as a means of demonstrating family status and as tools for teaching children and preparing them for adulthood.

In eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Sweden, wooden toys were the ordinary amusements of the poor. Carving small animals from the plentiful resource of wood was a traditional occupation for rural Swedes. By the mid-nineteenth century, as the cult of childhood innocence surged, the Swedish toy industry produced wooden animals, carts, dolls, sleds, and furniture for a rapidly growing domestic market.



Ulf Hanses for Playsam. Streamliner Rally, introduced 1984. Wood, metal. Private collection. Photographer: Bruce White.

As this exhibition traces the history of Swedish toy production, it critically examines the cultural embrace of the wooden toy as a symbol of timelessness and high quality. Sweden's forests provided an abundant natural resource for the toy industry and for amateur toy makers, but the veneration of the wooden toy was, and has remained, international. In the 1950s, when plastic became an increasingly common material for toys, the French critic Roland Barthes praised the warmth and reassuring qualities of wood for children's playthings. Swedish design achieved international prominence in the early twentieth century, and its products were exhibited and sold as examples of good design and manufacture. Although wood may suggest endurance and tradition, Swedish wooden toys also reflect a wider preoccupation with popular culture, such as children's books and animated films.

Through the twentieth century, the Swedish toy industry expanded into the worldwide market. Wartime scarcity

BRIO. Mexi stacking toy, introduced 1954.
Wood. BRIO Lekoseum.
Photographer: C83 Media, Carl-Johan Nilsson.



and embargo stimulated the market for Swedish goods. Exports, primarily to neighboring Nordic countries, increased and eventually spread to the United States and Great Britain. The products of the major Swedish toy manufacturers Gemla, Micki, and BRIO are a central focus of the exhibition, but many amateur-made objects reflect the particular inventiveness of the Swedish experience.

The ordinary wooden toy achieved new recognition as an agent in the training and educating of children, as an emblem of Swedish handicraft, and finally as a symbol of Sweden itself. *Swedish Wooden Toys* will show that from the handmade objects of the rural farmstead to the mass-produced products of major firms, Swedish toys not only reflect but also inform the changing social and cultural values of their time.

Themes

The Materiality of Wood and the Making of Swedish Toys: Carpentry and woodworking were necessary occupations in Sweden's historically agricultural society. Children learned the skills of carving, sawing, and joining both at home and through obligatory handicraft courses. Objects in this section include a full-scale workbench, tools, and carved parts for a large rocking horse, as well as jigsaw-cut toys, such as a jointed horse and rider and a large homemade model-bookcase of a suspension bridge. There are also a number of objects made by children themselves.

Motorcycle and rider, 1940–50.
Wood, metal. © Roma Capitale
– Sovrintendenza Capitolina ai
Beni Culturali – Collezione di
giocattoli antichi, CGA LS 9522.
Photographer: Bruce White.





John Carlsson. Dollhouse and furnishings, 1912. Belonged to Elsa Carlsson. Wood, glass, metal, various materials; wired for electricity. © Roma Capitale – Sovrintendenza Capitolina ai Beni Culturali – Collezione di giocattoli antichi, CGA LS 32. Photographer: Bruce White.

The Horse: The horse was the backbone of the rural Swedish economy until the early twentieth century, and its form became common as a child's toy. Among the many horses in this exhibition are traditional painted horses and a broad selection of rolling and rocking horses produced by both amateurs and Gemla, the largest nineteenth-century manufacturer. The painted Swedish horse was not only a favorite plaything, but it also became a recognized symbol of Sweden itself in the twentieth century.

Dollhouses: The dollhouse is a traditional type of amusement for both children and adults, and these diminutive dwellings describe the shift in housing and furnishing across three centuries. A particular highlight is the oldest known dollhouse from Scandinavia, a late seventeenth-century cabinet commissioned by Queen Mother Ulrika Eleonora for her daughter. In addition to the elegant models produced by major manufacturers, the inventive work of amateurs is also evident in several homemade dollhouses.

Transportation: Trains, cars, motorcycles, airplanes, and boats are among the most familiar forms of children's toys and a specialty among the Swedish toys produced in the twentieth century. The Swedish relationship with water encouraged many kinds of sailing toys, including a prize-winning 1923 sailboat built by a father and son, as well as other toy sailboats, rowboats, and canoes.

War Toys and Weapons: One of the earliest wooden toys ever discovered in Sweden is a sword, indicating that objects of conflict are central to the history of playthings. This concept is represented in the exhibition by a homemade slingshot, wooden rifles, and a Gemla cork pistol. Other objects on view are a large Swedish battleship from about 1918, a homemade submarine from the mid-1930s, and a submarine game from the mid-1940s.

Winter Toys: In a country where winter is the longest season of the year, toys for playing outdoors in the snow are a fundamental aspect of childhood. This part of the exhibition features a variety of sleds, skis, and skates, as well as toys to be played with on frozen lakes and in the snowy landscape.

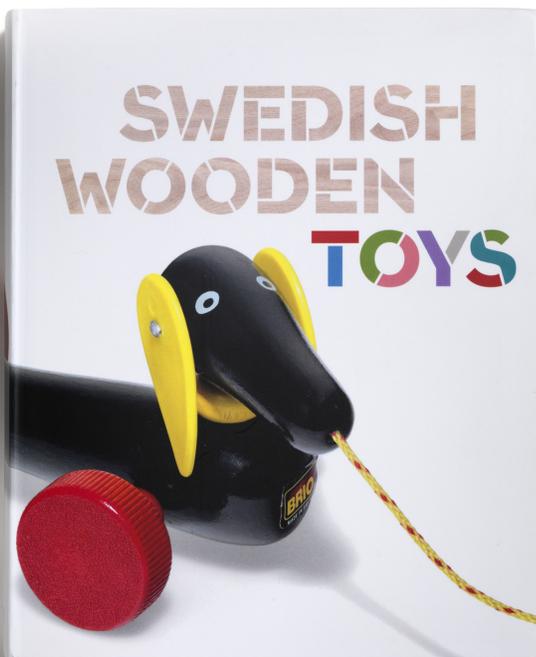
Puzzles and Games: The puzzles and games in this exhibition show how designers and manufacturers directed both children and adults toward the acquisition of specific abilities in such activities as puzzles, games of chance, croquet, table tennis, and bowling. A homemade set of Rävspel, an old Scandinavian game, and BRIO's Labyrinth, introduced in the 1940s suggest how playtime offered the opportunity to tune fine motor skills.

Educational Toys: The vision of a wholesome Swedish childhood is strongly associated with wooden educational objects. A pounding bench and stacking clown toy taught large motor skills and hand-eye coordination, while blocks and building sets taught patience and skill. Small-scale kitchen and cleaning toys instilled the work of daily life in Swedish children, and the toy loom became one of the most familiar Swedish educational toys thanks to required schooling in *slöjd*, or handicraft.

Toy Retailers and Consumer Toys: As the market for commercially made toys grew in the second half of the nineteenth century, the major manufacturers developed mail-order catalogues and sold their goods in shops and department stores.

Popular Culture in Swedish Toys: Although the tradition of wooden toys endures, popular culture marks many of the objects in the exhibition. In the twentieth century, BRIO

licensed characters from Disney films, and homemade toys include jigsaw-cut and jointed Popeye and Kewpie figures. Images of black entertainers and a dancing minstrel, in addition to an “Indian” play set, raise the specter of racism and cultural stereotyping in children’s playthings.



Publication

Swedish Wooden Toys, edited by the curators Susan Weber and Amy F. Ogata, has been published by Bard Graduate Center, in collaboration with Yale University Press. This superbly illustrated volume examines over 200 years of Swedish toys, from historic dollhouses to the latest designs for children. Featuring rattles, rocking horses, dollhouses, and building blocks to skis, sleds, and tabletop games with intricate moving parts, it also addresses images of Swedish childhood, the role of the beloved red Dala horse in the creation of national identity, the vibrant tradition of educational toys, and the challenges

of maintaining craft manufacturing in an era of global mass-production. The first substantial publication in English on the history and meaning of Swedish toys, it includes twelve essays by experts in the field and is available in the Gallery and online at store.bgc.bard.edu.

Gallery Programs

Lectures, gallery talks, and conversations are offered in conjunction with the exhibition. For more information, please call 212-501-3011 or e-mail programs@bgc.bard.edu.

Exhibition Tours

Group exhibition tours for adult and school groups are offered Tuesday through Friday between 11 a.m. and 4 p.m. and Thursday until 7 p.m. Reservations are required for all groups. To schedule a tour, please call 212-501-3013 or e-mail tours@bgc.bard.edu.

Bard Graduate Center Gallery is located in New York City at 18 West 86th Street, between Central Park West and Columbus Avenue. Gallery hours are Tuesday through Sunday from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. and Thursday from 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. Suggested admission is \$7 general, \$5 seniors and students.

About Bard Graduate Center

Bard Graduate Center is a graduate research institute in New York City. Our gallery exhibitions and publications, MA and PhD programs, and research initiatives explore new ways of thinking about decorative arts, design history, and material culture. Founded in 1993, we are an academic unit of Bard College.

For further information or images, please call 212-501-3074 or e-mail hollis.barnhart@bgc.bard.edu.

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