

PRETENDING: A STUDY OF ROLE-PLAYING - EXHIBITION

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Certain toys are a miniature version of our world. The objective of these toys is to have children act out different social parts through role-playing. Adults fashion children in their own image to assume the tasks and functions typical of parents, teachers and other people. This exhibition shows how childhood is envisioned through the creation of toys and the roles children take on in their interactivity with adult-made objects. We consider the ways that children inhabit a small part of our adult world and appropriate it to make it their own. In looking at the development of role-playing across the centuries this analysis of particular toys demonstrates significant changes in the evolution of the child's place in society. Our focus is on the different narratives represented by a variety of toys such as the tea set, the medical kit, the vanity set, military toys and a religious altar.



William Notman & Son. *Missie E. Dorothy Benson*. 1907. 17.8 x 12.7 centimetres.

(Image: McCord Museum <www.mccord-museum.qc.ca/en/collection/artifacts/N-1986.5.3.24>).

Miniature tea sets from the nineteenth century were a realistic smaller version of the ones used by adults. These early tea sets, made of porcelain were fragile and had to be played with most carefully, in comparison with to-day's durable cups and saucers made of colorful plastic. This appears to suggest that children are now encouraged to play and act like children, whereas in the past they were more disciplined and encouraged to behave like small adults. Tea sets were made for little girls to teach them learn how to be a proper lady, with all the manners that this social status requires. Although it is difficult to know for sure, the evidence indicates that nowadays, kids are permitted to play more vigorously without worrying about the fragile nature of this particular toy. Further, the British ritual of afternoon toy, so prevalent in Victorian times and the responsibility of women is now a custom of the past.

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Tea set from Green Toys. Made in the United States of America.

(Image: <madsilence.wordpress.com/2009/08/14/the-art-of-the-milk-bottle/>).

This colourful toy tea set was designed in the 2000's and did more than fulfil a child's need to play; it also marked a shift in environmental awareness amongst toy manufacturers. Issues of sustainability and durability in marketable goods originated in the late twentieth century and gained even greater importance with the new millennium, eventually reaching the forefront of the minds of consumers and producers. This particular tea set is assembled from recycled milk jugs and is dishwasher safe. It was designed with reusability in mind; its solid construction means that it can last for many years without breaking. Previously, the tea set was created only for a child's enjoyment and preparation for adulthood. Nowadays, toy production is influenced by greater environmental concerns of recyclability and reliability.

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Photograph. 1950s.

In this photograph from the 1950s a girl poses next to her miniature vanity set. A vanity set is used by women to apply their makeup, brush their hair, and partake in other rituals of beautification. The word "vanity" itself comes from the word vain and means to be overly proud of one's appearance. Over a century ago, as in this image, little girls were given their own vanities in order to role-play being their mothers. Through this role-playing, the girl learns how to present herself and what to care about, which is essentially her appearance.

Lisa Polkosnik



Photograph.

Even today we still give vanities to young girls even if mothers do not necessarily use them anymore. More often than not the bathroom with large mirrors and drawers and shelves for combs, brushes, cosmetic, etc. is where this kind of activity occurs. Here a young girl sits at her white vanity set, a much more practical version than the older miniature version that can fit into the regular décor of a girl's bedroom. This on-going tradition of giving little girls vanities has an inherent meaning even if perhaps it is not intentional. In this photograph, the girl in the pink dress appears to be drawing or coloring as if she were at a desk. The original intention however is not lost; across from her a mirror sits to always confront her about her appearance.

Lisa Polkosnik



Altar, toy. 1900-1930. 48 x 59.5 x 33 centimetres. (Image: McCord Museum, <www.mccord-museum.qc.ca/en/collection/artifacts/M990.783.1.1-14?Lang=1&accessnumber=M990.783.1.1-14>).

This toy altar from 1900-1930 holds a mystery because little information is available. Acquired by the McCord Museum along with a series of miniature religious objects it is thought to having belonged to a wealthy French Canadian family. The altar is made out of wood, hand-carved with intricate details and painted, in every respect very much like a real altar. Whether this was a unique production or a series of similar items is not known. The altar suggests the idea of the boy child, performing the role of the priest as a possible way of learning about the rituals of his Catholic faith and encouraging him to enter the priesthood. This large scale model reminds is that the Catholic Church in Quebec was at one time responsible for educating children The Church was a significant force in the life of the family, present in the boy's space and dictating the religious nature of his play.

Anais McNicoll-Castro Lopes



Toy soldier. 1908. Metal, 5.7 x 2.2 centimetres.

(Image: McCord Museum <www.mccord-museum.qc.ca/en/collection/artifacts/M2003.61.1.15>).

Military toys such as figurines of soldiers and toy guns were created for young boys to play at recreating war narrative based on the duality between good and evil. Proposed as gender-specific toy, young boys assume the role of the protector and defender against an imagined 'other'. Even if in our contemporary time it is more accepted that girls play with military toys, they remain mainly toys intended for boys. It is possible that the popularity of these toys is due to the continuous reality of wars.

Anais McNicoll-Castro Lopes



Diane Arbus. *Young Boy with Hand Grenade in Central Park*. 1962. Photograph.



Battat Medical Set.

(Image: <www.mamanista.com/2008/05/alleviating-doctor-appointment-fears.html>).



Bible Hand Puppets.

(Image: <www.thepuppetmall.com/site/1271752/page/488733>).



Nurse kit, toy. 1950-1959. (Image: McCord Museum, <www.mccord-museum.qc.ca/en/collection/artifacts/M2002.126.1.1-9>).