



*Soldiers on the move. Nineteenth century toys from the Erzgebirge region of Germany.*

## The most collectable of toys in the world are the ones that date from the turn of the nineteenth/ twentieth centuries.

by Jack Tempest

Lourens Bas is a Dutch international dealer specialising in antique toys. It is a fact that the most collectable of toys and allied playthings in the world are the ones that date from the turn of the nineteenth/twentieth centuries. Surviving examples are obviously now fully entitled to be recognised as antiques or will be very shortly eligible for that title. They were manufactured in a period of industrial activity when hand-made items were steadily giving way to mass production. The Industrial Revolution of Victorian times increasingly led to the availability of toys and dolls to less fortunate families.

Toy collecting is now a world-wide interest, particularly for rare examples. They need not necessarily have yet earned the right to be called antiques, but still attract amazingly high prices at specialist auction sales and at the toy fairs. Toys and dolls that have survived the ravages of time, as well as the rough treatment often meted out by children, certainly deserve to be honoured as prized collectables!

Lourens, who lives in the town of Hoorn on the edge of the IJsellmeer, once known as the Zuyder Sea, has travelled around the world in search of interesting items to add to his own collection, as well as the collections of fellow specialists in early juvenilia. In his younger days Lourens was a Continental circus entertainer, a tightrope-walker who presented his act wearing Dutch clogs! He was also interested in fairground items so it is not surprising that part of his juvenilia collection is devoted to early figural wooden fairground characters from a variety of children's rides and games. He is also internationally known for his wonderful collection of spinning tops, one of the oldest kind of playthings which was featured in a past edition of *Antiques Info*.

With his wife Ria, who is a collector of antique dolls, Lourens runs a well-known toy collectors' shop in his hometown. Hoorn also

has a noted toy and doll museum not far from The Bas's shop where each year its owner, Aaltje Kuiper displays her large collection of playthings at her toy museum *De Kijkdoos* (The Peepshow) in a picturesque seventeenth century building by the quayside. Each year the museum puts on a themed display of toys. The first such exhibition celebrated the world of theatre and the circus. This season the seaside holiday will be represented by toys associated with sea-boats, naval figures, tin-plate mechanical fish, deep-sea divers, and even lithographed buckets and spades!

Lourens and Ria have many items from their vast collection permanently on display at the museum and they are always ready to assist Aaltje in putting on a good display of playthings for the annual themed displays. This annual change of exhibition keeps visitors visiting the museum time after time, year after year! If you find yourself in beautiful Hoorn you will be able to visit *De Kijkdoos* from February to December. It opens from 11-5pm daily, closing only on Mondays.

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The couple tend to travel less nowadays but are invariably to be found with a stall at the Sandown Park Toy Collectors' Extravaganza at Esher, in Surrey, four times a year. They always bring a selection of valuable items with them, toys that are generally priced in the region of £2,000 to £3,000 on average, maybe even more. This event usually attracts several top international collectors who show rarities dating from early times up to pre-war Hornby Trains, Dinky Toys, and even post-Second World War tin-plate robots and space toys from Japan. The show is visited by hundreds of collectors looking for tin-toys, model



*French papier-mache figure of Harold Lloyd.*



*Wooden fairground game circa 1900.*



*The wooden toys in the background are by Gottschalk of Germany. The sailors and the seal are mechanical toys by Lehman of Germany, and the boat is an early novelty biscuit tin.*



*A submarine display featuring a Bing clockwork fish and a Carette diver. German nineteenth century toys.*



Two nineteenth century Biedermayer china dolls with a Märklin railway station refreshment trolley. All from Germany.



Another diver by the wreckage of an antique toy ship. The diver is a British celluloid toy from the 1930s.



The two nautical dolls are English, made by Nora Wellings.

railways, toy ships, die-cast motor vehicle models, early table games, jigsaw puzzles, dolls, teddy bear, and ephemera such as old trade catalogues and advertising material concerning such things.

There are many such toy fairs around the UK. Sandown is probably the most popular - possibly in the whole of Europe? Around the country are big toy shows such as the one at Shepton Mallet in the West Country, at the NEC near Birmingham, at Donington Park near Derby, and at the Yorkshire Showground, Harrogate. Edinburgh has shows at the Royal Highland Showground at Ingleston near Edinburgh Airport, and in the city centre. A smaller event appears regularly in Glasgow and several shows appear regularly in England and Wales.

Today antique toys appear to sell better at specialised auction sales. The interest in old toys has been great and surviving examples have soon found their way into collections. In the years prior to the Second World War there was no apparent interest in old toys. Old toys were simply - old toys! The idea of collecting them hardly existed. Only in the years following the end of that war saw toys becoming desirable collectables that attracted a massive following. Appreciation of the skills required to produce wooden and tin-plate toys grew steadily. Toys with ingenious animation were especially sought.

New reproduction toys are often 'aged' by shady dealers.

The man-in-the-street today has less chance of becoming a toy collector so far as antique toys are concerned. The worldwide demand for them has seen dramatic increases in their values, in many cases far too high for many visitors to the toy shows. They have become on one hand fairly scarce, and/or, pretty expensive, hence their move into the world of specialist auctions. Modern toys dating from the post-Second World War years still have a following because their prices are usually much lower. However, rarer examples of some of the playthings can be amazingly high. A tin-plate clockwork toy 'Dalek' from the BBC *Dr. Who* series) now can sell in the region of £1,000! Some of the plastic examples can be fairly high-priced, as can be some of the rarer toys based on popular films such as *Star Wars* and the 'James Bond' series.

Tin toys today are officially considered dangerous items for children and the only examples available are currently manufactured examples from Germany, Eastern Europe and the Far East. They must not be sold to children but, at the toy fairs examples are usually available for sale to adults. They are generally inexpensive, can be well made, excellent examples with appeal. Is it wise to collect these? OK if you are collecting them because you like them. Collecting for investment, who knows? Old toys were given to children who often played with them until they fell to pieces. Collectors are prepared to pay top prices for old playthings in good condition because they have somehow survived years of rough treatment and avoided damage and wartime destruction. Investment potential in currently produced tin toys is really for the dreamers!

Valuable toys can fetch £2000 to £3000 or even more.

New toys are often 'aged' by shady dealers. One well-known tin toy, featuring an elephant with a mechanically spinning propeller above its head is still made in Germany. It is a copy of an earlier example bearing the wording 'U.S. Zone of Germany' on its ankle. This denotes the part of Germany occupied by the Americans towards the close of the Second World War into the early 1950s. There are collectors who like to acquire toys so marked but they know about this reproduction. Others don't. I was shown one of these toys that a toy trader (who should have known better!) had bought, he said, "for only £45"! It had obviously been given the ageing treatment but he would not believe it was a product of recent times. Then I noticed something different. It was also marked with the initials 'EC' standing for the 'European Community'! When I mentioned it the next time I saw him he muttered "I sold it - and made a good profit on it" I doubt it!

The newcomer will find many books on the subject and would gain useful knowledge by visiting toy and doll museums of the world. Several are scattered around the UK and there are plenty of toy fairs to visit where many such items may be studied, if not bought!