

The Steiff Market, without the Bear

By Sophie Jackson

Say the word Steiff and people instantly picture a fluffy mohair teddy with a shiny gold button in its ear, ironic considering for the first 23 years of the company's existence there was no teddy bear in its catalogue. The first Steiff bear (often touted as the world's first toy bear) was designed by Richard Steiff in 1902 and labelled as Bear 55 PB. At the time no one realised that this unusual character would take the world by storm, helped by a US President refusing to shoot a bear cub in 1906. Yet the Steiff world has always been populated by more than just teddy bears with creatures great and small adorning its catalogue and attracting collectors and children alike.

Margarete Steiff

The founder of Steiff was the determined and clever Margarete Steiff who had an inauspicious start to life. Taken ill with polio in 1849 aged 18 months, she was left with her legs paralysed and right arm painful to move. Despite this Margarete was determined to go to school and even to train as a seamstress. She was a remarkable woman. She opened a dressmaker's shop with her two sisters in 1862. When her sisters moved away she continued on her own. In 1877 she took her business further. Instead of working piecemeal to orders she began to make a range of ready to wear clothes and household accessories to sell? She was soon able to employ other women to work for her.

Margarete may have remained in the clothing industry had it not been for one of those flukes of fate so often associated with the great and famous. In 1879 she spotted a pattern for a small fabric elephant in a magazine. Adapting the design she made several 'Elefäntle' to sell as pincushions. Instead they became incredibly popular as children's toys. Margarete quickly recognised there was a market for soft toys and by 1892 she was producing a catalogue of her products, including the original Elefäntle, now joined by monkeys, donkeys, horses, camels, pigs, mice, dogs, cats, rabbits and giraffes. Margarete used the slogan 'Only the best is good enough for children' to sell her toys, but the teddy bear was not a part of her range. Her nephew, Richard designed the first teddy bear and another nephew, Franz designed the Steiff button. The teddy bear quickly outshone the other animals in Margarete's range, much to her surprise. In 1907 974,000 teddies were produced by Steiff. Sadly Margarete Steiff only survived two more years to witness the success which began with a little felt elephant. In 1909 she died of pneumonia, aged 61.

Elefäntle and others

Finding Steiff from the early years of Margarete's work can be difficult, if not almost impossible. Examples are extremely rare, many simply not surviving the ravages of time. Felt toys were not indestructible. Finding one of the first Elefäntles is particularly difficult. The only examples from the Victorian period are mostly all in museums. The model was so popular that it continued to be made well into the twentieth century and most vintage examples are from the 1920s or later. There is no easy way to judge the exact age of an Elefäntle and auctions give a very broad approximate age when selling. A 1920s Elefäntle sold a few years ago in America for \$2,990 (£1,911), which in many respects seems quite low for such a significant item in the Steiff company's history. Steiff did not restrict its menagerie of creatures. It is said by some sources that by the 1990s Steiff had produced nearly 15,000 different animals. Certain creatures failed to capture the imagination of the public during the 1950s and early 1960s Steiff designed some unusual animals including a lizard, bat, spider and snail. They did not sell well and were quickly discontinued. Steiff also realised the potential of linking in with popular media characters of the day. A well-known example is the Steiff *Peter Rabbit*, who came in a few colour styles and versions and is not necessarily immediately recognisable. Collectors should beware as replica *Peter Rabbits*, remade by Steiff, are now on the market, as are replicas of the above mentioned 'creepy crawlies' which found only the very fewest of fans in the 1950s.

All Creatures Great and Small

The vast range of animal toys produced by Steiff mean there is scope for all levels of collectors. Dogs and cats are the most popular animals and the famous *Molly* dog is often a starting point for new Steiff fans. *Molly* was launched in 1925 and is heralded as the forerunner of the expansive Steiff dog range. The original was a brown and white dog. She came in several sizes ranging from 7 to 80cm and was later developed into a range of poses, styles and other products. *Molly* remains the only Steiff dog that is not a particular breed, she is just *Molly* the puppy. Her launch and subsequent popularity sparked a range of nearly forty breed-based dog toys between 1925 and 1938. She was also the first Steiff dog to be produced after the war. As large numbers were produced she does not command a high price, unless one of the larger, older models in good condition. A 28cm 1925 *Molly* sold at Christies for £150 in 1999. A decade on a 1930s 12cm *Molly*, minus her ear button is currently being offered on ebay for £121 and a 20cm 1930s *Molly*, with button, is being offered for £289. Most Steiff animals fall into the £150-£500 price range, depending on condition and rarity. A Steiff sheep with gilded cast iron wheels and original ribbon and bell, though minus its button and dating from 1910, sold for £666 in the USA. Also from 1910 a handsome bulldog, (*Tige* dog) fully jointed and in good condition, minus its button, sold for £370. In contrast a Steiff *Cockie* the Cocker Spaniel from the 1950s in excellent condition only achieved £19 and can be found for even less.

There are always examples that achieve well above the expected price. Steiff skittles are proof of this as they often sell for substantial figures. Skittles were one of the earliest lines Steiff made in 1892. They comprised of stuffed toys mounted on wooden bases which would topple when struck with a ball. They came in a variety of designs from pointers, elephants, dachshunds to cats, hens and a circus version with a dancing bear as the 'kingpin'. In all but the hen skittles the kingpin wore a felt jacket and crown. Interestingly you can tell if a set was manufactured for the European or USA market by the number of characters in it. European sets only had nine skittles, while USA sets always had ten, as in tenpin bowling. A set of hen skittles sold in 2010 for close to £18,000, while a mixed set sold for nearly £6,000. Even incomplete sets can easily fetch around £3,000.

Damage Limitation

Condition will greatly affect price. The earlier the model the less harmful missing buttons or fur are to their overall value, as finding perfect models from the late 1800s and early 1900s is quite a feat. But later animals do not gain the same sympathy and bald patches can reduce their value by as much as 75%.

The famous Steiff ear button is also a factor. Not introduced until 1904 (early examples will not have it) it began as a small button embossed with an elephant and has gone through a variety of permutations since. A guide to the various button designs can be found here http://www.steiffnews.com/history_steiff_button.htm though it is important to remember they are not a definitive guide to age. In 1926 card chest tags were introduced. For avid collectors only examples with both button and chest tag are acceptable and the loss of either is another way to reduce an item's value.

So do Steiff animals make a good investment? In comparison to the famous bears they will often lag behind in value, except for special examples, yet they are collectible and a good investment. *Molly* is a good example, increasing in value by over £100 in a decade. The other thing to bear in mind is that examples of Steiff animals can be picked up for a modest sum and while it will be many years before some are worth £100s of pounds. Certainly they are a very accessible avenue into the market besides which the figures have a charm and character all of their own, which appeal to buyers young and old and can make a welcoming change from the traditional teddy bear.



Four Steiff type rabbits, early 20thC, each brown and white patched, glass eyes, pink snouts, blue ribbons with bells, mother rabbit, 8in long, & her 3 young, 3in long. *Halls Fine Art, Shrewsbury. Oct 04. HP: £1,200. ABP: £1,416.*



Early 20thC Steiff Peter Rabbit, blue felt jacket and two red slippers, with Steiff button to ear, 24cm high. *Charterhouse, Sherborne. Sep 09. HP: £1,200. ABP: £1,416.*



Steiff pull toy cat, with wood wheels, a Steiff rabbit and a gold plush teddy bear, probably Steiff, largest 13in. *Gorringes, Lewes. Mar 09. HP: £850. ABP: £1,003.*



Steiff blue plush mammoth, with buttoned ear. *Gorringes, Lewes. Mar 06. HP: £580. ABP: £684.*



Steiff standing 'Bully' bull dog, black/white, swivel head with velvet muzzle, amber eyes, 'hairy' leather collar with studs stamped 'Steiff', pull string bark (faulty), on steel frame, wooden wheels, 15in long, c1930. *Hartleys, Ilkley. Oct 09. HP: £420. ABP: £495.*



Steiff dog 'Caesar', made to commemorate the funeral of Edward VII when his pet walked behind the cortage. *Brightwells, Leominster. Sep 11. HP: £380. ABP: £448.*



Steiff limited edition Elephant on Wheels, 1903/04 replica, 619/1000, 400407, 43cm high, boxed with certificate. *Charterhouse, Sherborne. Mar 12. HP: £260. ABP: £306.*



Steiff push-a-long lamb, with spoked metal wheel, plain button to left ear, c1904, 32cm long. *Rosebery's, London. Dec 04. HP: £180. ABP: £212.*



Steiff bulldog, early 20thC, straw filled, covered in brown felt with cream chest and front feet, swivel limbs, black button eyes, (resewn) snout, metal button in left year, 12in long. *Hartleys, Ilkley. Mar 12. HP: £170. ABP: £200.*



Steiff monkey, sawdust filled with articulated limbs, glass eyes and felt face, in pale brown mohair, with button, 12in high. *Dee, Atkinson & Harrison, Drifffield. Mar 09. HP: £140. ABP: £165.*



Early Steiff seated figure of a dog with pale wool body, amber glass eyes, stitched nose, red felt slippers, 8in high (front somewhat worn and one slipper replaced), under glass cylindrical dome. *Canterbury Auction Galleries, Canterbury. Feb 07. HP: £120. ABP: £141.*



Steiff novelty duck and two ducklings pull along toy, early 20thC, covered in machine embroidered felt, black bead eyes, eccentrically mounted on wire and wood wheels, and axles, 15in long overall. *Hartleys, Ilkley. Oct 11. HP: £115. ABP: £135.*



1920s/1930s Steiff figure of a hare in short mohair plush, glass eyes, wearing cotton dungarees, 9in high. (stuffing to arms missing & damaged, and clothing worn and torn) *Canterbury Auction Galleries, Canterbury. Jun 07. HP: £100. ABP: £118.*



Steiff zebra, 14cm, turkey, 11cm, kitty, 10cm, brown bear, 10cm, bird, 12cm, spaniel, 11cm. *Gorringes, Lewes. Mar 01. HP: £90. ABP: £106.*



Steiff soft toys, post war, donkey, 6.5in, dog, 6.5in and squirrel, 5in. *Gorringes, Lewes. Oct 02. HP: £85. ABP: £100.*



Steiff standing zebra and foal, covered in striped plush with amber eyes, button to mother's ear, 13in and 8in high. (2) *Hartleys, Ilkley. Mar 09. HP: £75. ABP: £88.*



Steiff original plush bulldog, 6in high, red collar and two labels. *Gorringes, Lewes. Jul 00. HP: £70. ABP: £82.*



Steiff elephant No. 062513, 16in long, a Steiff Giraffe No.03224, 9.5in high, and a 'Molly Leo' Seated Lion No.103452, 21in long, all with labels, E. (3) *Hartleys, Ilkley. Oct 10. HP: £65. ABP: £76.*



Steiff original Collie dog, length 53cm, with paper tag and button and label in ear (G/F), with 3 Steiff Miniature Petsy bears: 029479, 029424, 029523 (VG/E with tags), and boxed 653155 Harrods Steiff Elephant. (M). (5) *Aston's, Dudley. Dec 11. HP: £60. ABP: £70.*



Steiff 'Molly Baby' leopard cub No.102929, 11.5in high, and another 102905, 8in high, both boxed. *Hartleys, Ilkley. Oct 10. HP: £55. ABP: £64.*



Steiff dog, two tone plush body, red leather collar, metal ear tag, 17cm long. *Gorringes, Lewes. Mar 01. HP: £50. ABP: £59.*



Original 1960s Steiff gold mohair rabbit, stitched nose and mouth, metal Steiff button in ear. *Aston's Auctioneers, Dudley. Oct 10. HP: £50. ABP: £59.*



Steiff 420313 Little Elephant 'Elefantle' pincushion, Steiff Club Edition 2002/2003, 8cm high, Limited edition No.2410. M and complete with certificate, box and outer box. Together with Steiff 028649 and Steiff 028625 Teddy Bears, both M and boxed. (3) *Aston's, Dudley. Dec 11. HP: £50. ABP: £59.*



Blond mohair lion, straw filled, glass eyes, depicted seated, possibly Steiff, 14in high. *Dee, Atkinson & Harrison, Drifffield. Mar 09. HP: £40. ABP: £47.*