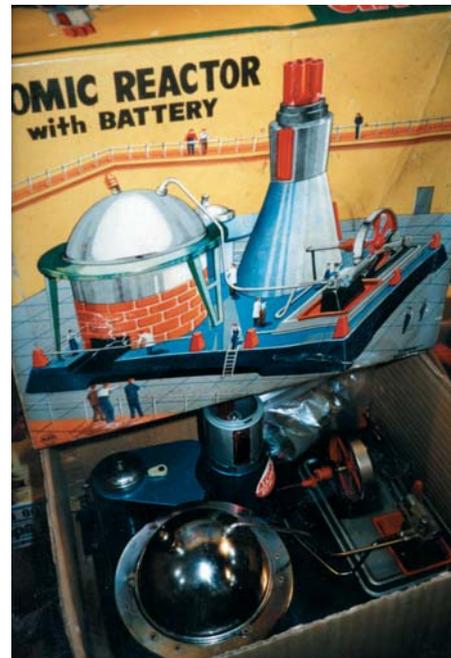




Sci-fi toys are ever popular. These battery-operated examples include a fantasy robot and 'Batman'. Robots vary in price and are generally highly priced according to scarcity. The 'Batman' is also well sought after and the last one I saw was priced at £500.



This Japanese battery powered 'Batmobile' features Batman and Robin. A very collectible item at around £200-£300.



This curiosity is a battery toy representing an 'Atomic Reactor', shown in its carton with colourful box lid. A rarity combining a steam-engine with battery-power. (About £400-£500).

Japan's wonderful battery toys

by Jack Tempest

The first wheeled toys gained their independent movement by gravity or by simply being pushed or pulled along. Friction was possible too, but needed an internal flywheel drive to offer a reasonable performance. The usual way for setting a heavy metal flywheel spinning rapidly was by means of a pull-string, just as many spinning tops were successfully activated. One of the last toy-makers to produce such inertia-operated toys was Hess of Germany. Hess made several tin-plate model motor cars powered by flywheel action and also an 'electric' dynamo that could operate simple toys via a pulley and belt system. As in their once famous cars the internal flywheel was set spinning rapidly by the winding of a handle. The 'electric' dynamo was definitely non-electric!

The use of electricity came about at the turn of the nineteenth to twentieth centuries but was only available in large models of ships and cars. They needed to be large because contemporary batteries were far from small apart from being quite heavy. They were not popular and the live-steam and clockwork models soon became favourite. The 'Steam Age', introduced with the Industrial

Revolution, saw the appearance of many model stationary engines as well as toy motor vehicles and ships designed to generate steam power. Toy railways quickly made their appearance with the development of the steam railway systems. Parents liked to buy their sons such toys in which they saw educational interest!

Toy trains were ever popular - they still are to this very day! Live steam and clockwork motors provided the necessary reasonable freedom of movement, especially in the case of the examples designed to run along tracks. It was the metal tracks that made model railways the first playthings to be electric powered. The transformed current from the household mains could be fed to the model railway lines and picked up by the locomotive as it travelled along. Low voltage made the 'live' track safe for the operator. Originally a three-rail track was used, the centre rail carrying the current, but later a more realistic two-rail system was introduced. Gradually the clockwork mechanisms of toy trains were replaced by electric motors and made remote control of the operation of a large layout possible.



'The Happy Band Trio' offer a somewhat rowdy, but jolly musical performance once switched on! (Around £150-£200).



'Charley Weaver' is one of the commonest of figural Japanese battery toys. His action is impressive and is good value for money (£80-£100 in good working condition). This example was seen at a toy fair.

In the 1930s electric dry batteries had become smaller, being mainly designed to fit hand torches and bicycle lamps. A few toys eventually appeared that, generally, could offer little more than toy car headlamps that could be switched on and off. It was only in the post Second World War years that the Japanese introduced tin toys that offered all kinds of battery-powered actions. They fitted out their products with numerous miniature motors and electrical devices that revolutionised the toy industry. Not only could toy cars offer on-and-off headlights but could produce smoke from their exhausts and have realistic-sounding horns! The electricity could also be applied to figural toys and make them walk, talk, and smoke (real smoke!) cigars!

The flood of Japanese toys after peace returned in the wake of the Second World War was prolific, seriously affecting Germany's once dominant toy industry. The Japanese output also included a mass of well-designed and manufactured clockwork and friction novelty playthings, but it was their battery-toys that made the biggest impression and led to a wide interest from collectors internationally. Because of the high strength of the US\$ the bulk of these Japanese toys were aimed principally at the American market, as collectors are well aware. Police Cars were American Police Cars, Fire Engines and Railway Locomotives were American styled, and toy taxicabs obviously reflected a New York image. The majority of character toys were American, though many of these, including Mickey Mouse, Batman, and Superman were universally recognised, thanks to Hollywood. Probably the commonest of battery automatons was a cheerful chappie

known as 'Charley Weaver'. Charlie is featured as a bartender who vigorously shakes a cocktail, pretends to pour it into a glass and then drink it. Through the miracle of battery power his vinyl face turns lights up and turns bright red as smoke pours out of his ears! Strong stuff! He recovers, to repeat the performance until the battery power is switched off.

Amusing stuff, and many a home bar around the world displays a 'Charley Weaver' toy, or another very similar 'Bartender' battery toy representing no one in particular! 'Charley Weaver' is not a nobody by any means and was, in the 1950s, a very popular American vaudeville and TV character created by entertainer Cliffe Arquette! All the effects created by battery power were available in other of these unique Japanese products. Coloured lighting brightened up many a product and the smoke-generating capsule was used to add realism to railway engines, toy steamboats, and motor vehicles by causing real smoke to issue from their chimneys, funnels, and exhaust pipes. A heated wire in a capsule containing thin oil was the smoke-generating device.

The range of battery operated novelty toys included many strange robots - even a 'Talking Robot' - and other science-fiction vehicles, flying saucers and rocketships. 'Pete the Parrot' had the ability to repeat whatever was said to him, a number of airliners were produced, and all kinds of vehicles. The aircraft were obviously unable to fly but many performed realistically the taxi-ing, testing of their engines, and general preparation for take-off. One example had a door open automatically to reveal the figure of an air-hostess and another had a hostess walking up and down

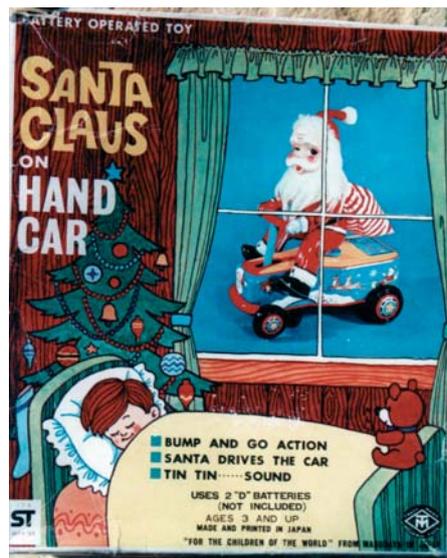
between seated passengers. Such toys turn up in auction and at the toy fairs from time to time. Their values have remained reasonably stable across recent years and are usually offered around the £150 mark - less if they have imperfections. Valuing them wholesale is like saying 'how long is a piece of string'. Such toys come in a variety of types, some being far more amusing than others. Some are worth more, depending upon their rarity, and of course, their condition. Before buying it is wise to see such toys in action. Make sure that the vendor has the batteries necessary to allow you to watch the toy in action. Some dealers might say they have forgotten to bring batteries - not always true!

Inspect the battery compartment always. Often such toys have been put away, still with batteries in position and forgotten. They will probably have eventually leaked to attack the internal connections and wiring. It is essential to remove the batteries when the toys are not in use; the batteries may well be marked 'leakproof' but don't rely on this!

Books on the subject tend to be mainly of American origin, one of the best being *Battery Toys, the Modern Automata* by Brian Moran. This was first published in 1984 and offers a 'desirability listing' - much more useful than a price-guide! It may not currently be published, but such books occasionally turn up at collectors' and toy fairs.



The Japanese were responsible for several battery-operated aircraft, such as this 'US Airforce' military transport plane. It behaves realistically on the ground, taxi-ing for take-off with props spinning. In fact it does most things but fly! Its nose-cone drops to release a model Jeep, just like its real counterpart! (£100-£200)



Even Santa Claus is remembered as a battery toy. He rides up and down on his hand-car with 'bump and go' action. (£50-£75 - the higher price at Yuletide!)



Germany suffered from postwar competition from Japanese toys. 'Schuco' of Germany produced a series of remote cable-controlled 'Viscount' airliners in the livery of various contemporary international airlines. This example 'Radiant-5000' is a 'Pan-American' example. A remote control cable permitted steering manoeuvres on the ground. The engines were 'tested' individually by the pilot, finally all four turning together.