

The History of Dolls' Houses and current market prices at auction

by Brenda Greysmith



A painted wooden dolls' house made in England in about 1880. It was sold at Bonhams May sale for £2,000.



Exterior of a dolls' house made by Fribourg and Treya, purveyors to the kings of Hanover and Belgium. Sold at Bonhams May sale for £2,000.



A painted wooden dolls' town house made in England in about 1870. It was sold for £1,500 at Bonhams sale in May.

In recent years, rising values in the real-life, full-size property market have been reflected in increasing prices for dolls' houses. But while estate agents fear that the upward trend may not continue, dolls' house experts predict no slowdown for the miniature properties: Christie's and Bonham's report that dolls' house sales have developed rapidly over the last four years and are now booming. With fewer and fewer early examples now reaching the auction houses, this trend seems likely to get even stronger.

The European tradition of miniature properties, initially called baby houses, stretches back more than 400 years, with the earliest recorded example made in 1557-58 for Duke Albrecht of Bavaria. This sumptuously furnished, four-storey miniature utilised the skills of many craftsmen and was put in a museum rather than the nursery. Subsequent dolls' houses continued to reflect the wealth of their owners but, in Germany particularly, also helped upper-class daughters to learn about household management through play. In Holland, the dolls' house took a rather different form: magnificent cupboards, called 'cabinet houses', were used to display expensive collections of miniature replicas. Although the interior might look like rooms, the front would be cabinet doors rather than a house facade.

The British have long been enthusiasts too, but their dolls' houses took the form of replica houses with realistic exteriors. Among the fine dolls' houses made during the eighteenth century is the one at Nostell Priory. The tradition of dolls' houses designed by the famous and made by master craftsmen has continued since: probably the most well known is Queen Mary's dolls' house, which was designed by Sir Edward Lutyens and completed 1921-24. Of course, collectors hanker after examples that were commissioned for the child of a wealthy family and made by the top carpenters of their day, but such miniature properties were expensive when first created and remain costly now. Tatiana's Palace, built in 1907 by artist Sir Neville Wilkinson, broke dolls' house records when sold for £135,000 by Christie's in 1979.

Even when not designed by a well-known name, hand-made examples still fetch high prices. The collection of Vivien Greene, widow of the author Graham Greene and a pioneer in the field of dolls' house collecting, was sold by Bonhams in 1999. It included a William and Mary House, dating from the late seventeenth or early eighteenth century, which sold for £17,250, and a miniature stately home in the Palladian style which fetched £23,000. Right up to the present day, dolls' house

making has continued to attract highly skilled craftsmen, and hand-made examples of quite recent vintage can command high prices.

Fortunately for the less well-heeled, there are interesting examples available for far less. From the mid nineteenth century, the ornamental and unique dolls' house evolved into the more standardised version, mass-produced as a child's plaything. Among the early commercial manufacturers, German firms Christian Hacker (1870-1914) and Moritz Gottschalk (1865-1939) are very sought after, with their best houses selling for about £4,000 at auction. Among the notable London-based companies were Silber & Fleming (1850-1900). However, most of the dolls' houses appearing at auction now were made by less well-known manufacturers of the late nineteenth century; they can be purchased from about £300.

More recently made commercial dolls' houses attract attention too, especially those produced by Lines Brothers Ltd, founded in 1919 (although the company had been making toys in the late nineteenth century using the Thistle trademark). They specialised in well-constructed models of the Mock Tudor and Queen Anne suburban housing of the time. A Lines wooden house sold for £822 against an estimate of £300-£400 at Christie's sale in May. Look out too for the work of Paul and Marjorie Abbott, 1930s pioneers of educational toys, whose simple dolls houses had open sides and lift-off roofs.

Whatever the age of a house, condition and quality is fundamental to value. Fixtures such as staircases, fireplaces and chimneys should be intact, while doors should open and shut. Ideally, a house should also have its original furnishings: this not only gives great insight into past decorative styles, it will have a substantial impact on price. However, like real-life homes, many dolls' houses have been redecorated to suit changing tastes.

The refurbishment of vintage dolls' houses may be one reason why furniture and accessories are also fetching high prices. But in addition, there are also collectors who just enjoy such items as miniatures to be displayed as small, very beautiful objects. As a result, good quality antique furniture and accessories are fetching high prices: a rare group of Regency dolls' house drawing room furniture fetched £5,640 against an estimate of £2,500-£3,500 at Christie's May sale. Furniture from the first half of the twentieth century, however, is much more affordable and considered by some to be relatively undervalued. A large selection of 1930s dolls house furniture was sold by Bonham's in May for £320.



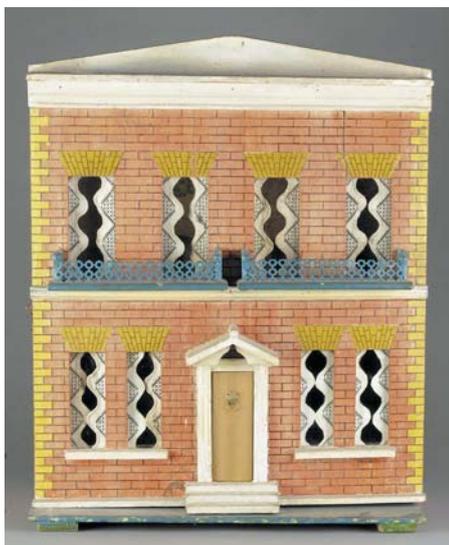
From AG & J Lines, wooden dolls' house No. 20. Sold for £822 at Christie's in May.



A Maurice Gotshalk dolls' house with paper on wood house. Sold for £822 at Christie's in May.



Interior of a dolls' house made by Fribourg and Treya, purveyors to the kings of Hanover and Belgium. Sold at Bonhams May sale for £2,000.



A Silber & Fleming type, box-back dolls' house. Sold for £282 at Christie's in October.



A paper brick effect house by sought after German maker Moritz Gottschalk. Complete with a good selection of furniture, it sold for £1,380 at Bonhams in October.



This painted wooden Scandinavian house sold for £376 at Christie's in October 2001.



A Maurice Gotshalk dolls' house with lithographed paper on wood house. Sold for £1,410 at Christie's sale in May.



Early English dolls' house furniture. Sold at Christie's in May, this group far exceeded expectations, fetching £2,115 against an estimate of £300-£400.



An unusual five-storey dolls house by the very sought after nineteenth century German maker Christian Hacker. Sold for £2,115 at Christie's in October.