



CHAPTER 1

A Toymaker's Life

A Brief History of Toys

After toiling all day in the hot sun, making his meager living as a farmer, a father residing along the mighty Huang He River in China walked with his eight-year-old son into a windswept field. The father paused; a strong breeze upon his face told him that the conditions were near optimal. He smiled as he knelt on the ground and unfurled a bundle that he had held tightly beneath his arm. The contents of the bundle fell gently to the earth. His son's eyes suddenly danced with delight as his tiny fingers grabbed at the unexpected treasure. The boy pulled at the gift, made of a light bamboo frame and a silk sail, a project his father and mother had been working to complete for many weeks with materials not easy to acquire. That made it all the more precious.

The father gave his son a string that was attached to the contraption, told him to wait there, and then he walked across the field with the silk and wooden design, the light material billowing slightly in the breeze. The father turned and paused when he reached the other end of the field, waiting for the breeze to strengthen just a bit. As it did, the father tossed the contraption into the air and it soared upward and seemingly above all of China. The boy screamed with delight as he kept a strong grip on the string, holding the kite firmly as it rose. The kite's silk revealed the painting of a fierce dragon. The

small boy had seen only a couple of other kites in his entire life, often used by nearby army camps to send coded messages back and forth across China. But now he had one of his own, not for the military uses of adults but for the amusement of children.

In the modern calendar, the year that this father and son walked into the field was 1000 B.C., some three thousand years ago. This was some five hundred years before the birth of the great philosopher Confucius, long before the first Qin emperor, Shi Huangdi, ordered the construction of the Great Wall, and nearly a thousand years before Buddhism was introduced into China from India.

The simple kite was among the first blockbuster toys. It was not mass produced by an international corporation, not announced with the aid of a multimillion-dollar advertising blitz, and certainly not discovered in the bottom of a fast-food bag. It was constructed, announced, and distributed by loving parents.

Far to the west, a small boy and his sister lived in the comfort born of kings. Their diet was rich in beef, antelope, and gazelle meat. They ate many finely baked goods and drank fruit beverages obtained from plants that grew along the mighty Nile River. While these children were more modestly dressed, their parents adorned themselves with rare jewelry, fine clothes, and brightly colored cosmetics. The children had a rich life with many diversions. Playthings were often crafted by others for their amusement. The boy played with a toy tiger, its mouth opening and closing on hinges as the child pulled a string. He had long since given up his rattle, which was shaped like a cow with stones inside. But he still played with his miniature wheeled horses that he loved to race across his palace's intricately painted tile floor. His sister often played with these as well, though her favorite possession was a doll with moveable arms, made of painted wood and wearing a short white dress. Sadly, this girl, the daughter of Pharaoh, died and was



Two horses (modern wheels). Egypt, Naukratis, sixth century B.C. Courtesy of the Allard Pierson Museum, Amsterdam.

buried at Thebes with that doll. These were the Egyptians who lived several thousand years ago. They gave civilization many things, including a paperlike material for writing known as papyrus and the 365-day calendar.

In a temple farther to the east, a group of children clad in simple woolen garments scampered through a ceremonial dwelling after religious services had ended. They were taking turns pulling their carved-limestone playthings across the stone floor. One of the toys was in the shape of a lion, whereas another was in the shape of a porcupine. They were both mounted on wheels and pulled with a string, making them among the first-known pull toys in the history of the world. The children chased each other out through the dwelling's large doors, and in so doing, they inadvertently left their playthings behind.

Later that evening, they forgot entirely where they had placed them, and the toys were left to be found thousands of years later. This was Iran and the temple is now 3,000 years old.

Back again to the west some years later, another civilization was approaching the height of its golden age. In one of this culture's city-states, a small family consisting of two parents and their son and daughter worked their modest though prosperous farm. It was a hard but rewarding life. They raised pigs, cultivated a small grove of olives, grew wheat and barley, and even worked a few fine crafts. And though they might appear to be laborers alone, the spirit of these people would ignite a world. They were fiercely independent and creative thinkers. Their minds constantly examined nature and existence on both a grand and subtle level.

One particular evening, as the family retreated to their four-room house built of sun-dried bricks, the mother was busy polishing the edges of a small disk-shaped object that she had made from terracotta clay. She smiled as she paused to feel the smooth edges.

"Mama, is it ready?" asked her seven-year-old daughter.

"Yes, it is!" her mother said proudly as she handed her the disk. "But be careful," she cautioned. "This one is made of clay and is more delicate than your wooden one."

The child took the disk, which was beautifully painted by her mother's own hand, and as she had done so many times before with the other she owned, she let it drop to the floor. But just as the disk almost touched, she gave a good yank on a string that catapulted it up again. And so it went again, up and down. It was a yo-yo.

"That's enough," said her mother. "Remember, this one is not for playing. When you come of age, we will offer this toy of your youth to the gods, as is our custom, so as to mark your rite of passage into adulthood." The mother smiled as she took the delicately crafted yo-yo from her daughter and carefully set it down in a place of honor near the fire. The daughter retreated

to the corner of their cottage with her younger brother and began to play with assorted other diversions that her mother and father had crafted. They included a clay doll with moveable arms that held a rattle in each hand, a top, and a hollowed-out wooden horse that carried small wooden warriors within its belly . . . the fabled Trojan horse.

This was the year 500 B.C. The farm was near Athens, the very cradle of western civilization, law, and medicine. It will be 200 more years before the Greek philosopher Plato founds a school known as the Academy. This is the land where rudimentary forms of government will influence the world to this very day, where Aristotle will enlighten the minds of mankind and be the mentor to Alexander the Great, and where ancient religious festivals will become the foundation of the celebrated Olympics.



Spinning top. Terracotta. Greece, fourth century B.C. Courtesy of the Allard Pierson Museum, Amsterdam.



Jointed doll with rattles in hands, from a child's tomb. Terracotta. Athens, Greece, ca. 450 B.C. Courtesy of the Allard Pierson Museum, Amsterdam.

Children even farther to the west, in the year A.D. 79, sat playing with toy soldiers and marionettes. They imagined great battles and fantasized about being great warriors and generals. After all, their civilization had come to conquer the known world, and it was often said that the sun never set on this civilization, for its depth and breadth was immense. These children were Romans, and each had a relative who was part of the Roman legions, taught to conquer or be conquered. As such, many of the playthings constructed for these children were not just for amusement, but a way to introduce them to the sometimes harsh realities of the world. But on this particular day, as these children ran through the streets of their town, tragedy would befall them far too early. They were in the shadow of a mountain that would spell their demise. Mount Vesuvius erupted, and due to a wind that blew in their direction instead of another, they were buried along with their beloved Pompeii. Years later, their toys would be unearthed, along with hollowed-out forms in the ash where their bodies once were.

In a New World, by Old World standards, children ran about their village, playing many games. Girls played with dolls fashioned from cornhusks and with feather-stuffed leather balls. Boys played with miniature bows and arrows and longed for the day when they would be asked to accompany the men on the buffalo hunt, a very important rite of passage. They would use the leather of the beast to make fine garments and the meat to fill their bellies. These were great, proud peoples who had become as one with nature. They were the Native Americans, and they dominated this land many hundreds of years before Europeans set foot upon the so-called New World.

This is all to say that toys are as old as mankind. They were there at great moments in history and all the moments in between, all around the world. They are part of us and, in many ways, define us. Throughout the years, toys reflected our religions, environments, and passions. They revealed what we feared, what we sought to achieve, how we made a living, and

what we dreamed. Though the finer details of the stories cited above were created to paint a rich mosaic, the toys and each general situation were based upon the archaeological record. It was real.

“Toys have been uncovered in every part of the world from India to Peru, and in every era, dating back 5,000 years,” says Dr. Annemarieke Willemsen, curator of the National Museum of Antiquities of the Netherlands and author of *Kinder delijt* (*Children’s Delight: Medieval Toys in the Netherlands*, Nijmegen, 1998). She went on to tell me:

They were prominent because they played an important role in children’s lives. Yes . . . they were often for a child’s amusement. These playthings might include ancient spinning tops, yo-yos, hoops, knucklebones, and rattles. Among the oldest and most consistent are animal figures on wheels, with a hole in the nose for a string to pull them. But toys also helped prepare children for life’s challenges, and they mirrored the society that produced them. Boys in ancient Pompeii played with figures of Roman soldiers and gladiators. Girls in ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome played with moveable figurines of adult women. . . . Jointed dolls and wheeled horses can be considered the best-sellers of antiquity. They were made in large quantities and regularly given as presents. In their style and decoration, toys of all ancient periods unveiled the fashion of their times.

This is not to say that all children in all times benefited from such playthings. Certainly, children in families with greater means had more toys. It’s also true that, for many thousands of years, childhood was not recognized as a time for play but simply as a time before these younger adults would be pressed into service to help their families make an adult living. Still, even before childhood emerged as a special time, there were indications that many began to view it as such. It should also be noted that, throughout history, toys were constructed for the amusement of adults, and many of those playthings have been unearthed.

For thousands of years, toys meant for the young were undoubtedly created by parents and relatives using materials available in nature. They lovingly crafted figures, dolls, balls, marbles, tops, and many other items for the amusement of their children. It was a giving and sharing of love that spanned eons.

Though parents were important early toymakers, it is also clear that independent craftsmen were involved at very early times. Archaeologists unearthed a toy factory that existed in India some five thousand years ago. As civilization began to mature and move slowly from a predominantly hunting, gathering, and even farming existence to one that included craftsmanship of many kinds, parents' involvement in creating playthings gradually subsided as these professional toymakers began to appear. But it was undoubtedly a haphazard process, and only those with greater means could afford to buy a plaything from a craftsman.

Fairs across Europe during the Middle Ages brought craftsmen from near and far to sell their goods. Carved figures of knights and horses were common in the toy box. The hobby-horse made its first appearance. German toymakers began to refine their craft and became master toymakers, drawing heavily upon quality materials found in the Black Forest.

A toy shop in Boston, one of the first known in the New World, appeared in the early 1700s. "When I was a child of seven years old," wrote Benjamin Franklin, "my friends, on a holiday, filled my pocket with coppers. I went directly to a shop where they sold toys for children, and being charmed with the sound of a whistle, that I met by way in the hands of another boy, I voluntarily offered and gave all my money for one."

In the late 1700s, craftsmen began to add another dimension to toys: mechanical and clockwork movements. A Swiss watchmaker created a doll that could move and, with writing implement in hand, actually write words. A French inventor, who created the metronome for the piano, decided to use his

talents to make the first speaking doll in the 1820s. When its arms were positioned just right, it said, “*Maman*” and “*Papa*.” American toymakers began creating toy trains and figures that moved by the power of a key-wound spring. When gun manufacturing slowed down after the Civil War, one manufacturer invented the cap gun as a way to sustain production. The BB gun followed by 1886.

The Industrial Revolution allowed for mass production, which drove prices down and made manufactured toys far more accessible to all. They were often made of cast iron and tin, using the mass-production techniques and cheap materials of the period. American tin toys became world famous by the late 1800s and early 1900s, during which time factories produced millions of tin toys such as trains, fire engines, wagons, and figures.

Toys’ Emergence into Pop Culture

Today’s brands began to appear in the early 1900s. These included Lionel Trains (1901), Crayola Crayons (1903), Erector Sets (1913), and Tinkertoy (1913). Donald Duncan reignited the yo-yo in the late 1920s.

The mid-1900s saw more advancement in creating and selling toys. Plastics began to replace metal and wood. Mass distributors replaced mom-and-pop toy stores. Mass marketing replaced random newspaper advertisements.

Ole Christiansen invented the early prototype of LEGO Building Bricks in 1949. Ruth Handler, the cofounder of Mattel, invented the Barbie doll in 1959. Two brothers named Henry and Helal Hassenfeld founded Hasbro, which in 1964 introduced an American icon, the G.I. Joe action figure. And while we think of these companies as global enterprises of some might, it’s important to remember that they each began as a one- or two-person operation, often at a toymaker’s bench, in search of a plaything to make a child smile.

But nothing could have predicted what happened in 1955.

That was a landmark year for toys. That's when Mattel paid \$500,000 to advertise its products on "The Mickey Mouse Club." It was the year that mass marketing found a mass audience. The marketing of toys entered a new era, and so did toymakers. What had been a cottage industry for thousands of years transformed into one with huge dimensions. Once toys found a place on television, they became an enduring part of pop culture, not only reflecting the times on a massive scale but creating the fads as well.

Money began to change hands on an unprecedented scale and toys became big business. Total toy advertising expenditures in the United States in 2001 approached \$790 million, the bulk of which was on television, according to CMR/TNS Media Intelligence U.S. and Publishers Information Bureau. The total dollar sales of toys in the United States reached \$34 billion that year, including both traditional toys and video games, according to the NPD Group and the Toy Industry Association. Worldwide sales of toys were roughly \$70 billion. The American International TOY FAIR became the industry's annual event where many toy companies come to showcase their new toys and attract buyers such as Wal-Mart and Toys R Us. The 2003 TOY FAIR, which is owned and managed by the Toy Industry Association, hosted some 1,700 toy exhibitors and over 11,000 buyers from around the world. The development of this forum, plus manufacturers' private toy shows, was significant because toys gained both status and an international stage. Year in and year out, the toy trade, the media, and the consuming public actively wait for the Next Big Thing in toys, that item that will ignite sales, passions, and pop culture.

And so, each and every year, toymakers ponder how to create the Next Big Thing. This haunts them, for the elusive answer has created both fortunes and disasters. Why are some toys immensely successful and others not? Why do children ask parents for some toys and ignore thousands of others? What is the role of parents, and why do they accept some toys and not allow



2003 American International TOY FAIR. Courtesy of the Toy Industry Association.

others? And what is it, beyond the mere making and selling of a toy, that can bring it to blockbuster status today? Promotion and public relations engines, for example, have recently added mightily to the power of advertising. Entertainment plays a critical role, too, as more and more toys are born not from a toymaker's bench as much as they are born from a screenwriter's pen.

Still, there are no guarantees. The dark truth is that there are more failures than successes in the toy world. Many new toys don't make it past one selling season, and most new toy companies eventually evaporate. Why?

The Blockbuster Toy

The Blockbuster Toy! will attempt to answer these questions. It's a journey into the very birth of the massive toy brands that exist today in order to help the reader better understand how and why they came into being. It will provide keen insights into why children love certain toys year after year and why parents accept them year after year. The objective of this book is to help today's toymakers achieve even greater success and to help toymaker wannabes ignite a career and sustain it.

Through our journey, it is humbling to keep one thing in mind; that in the history of the world, toys were rarely about gaining riches and fame, an unfortunate side effect of contemporary times. Instead, toys were about sharing love and igniting laughter. They were crafted by parents and a handful of artisans in hopes of creating a smile on a child's face. In turn, that would make the parents happy, too, because it allowed them to entertain their beloved children in a world often filled with too many harsh realities.

Don't follow the money. Follow the smile. This is not just a sentimental directive; it's also a financially astute one. Following the elements that inspire children to smile will ensure that your toys are satisfying children's core emotional needs. It's also the case that many toymakers who invented blockbuster toys did so by not following the pack (i.e., the money). Instead, they followed new paths that had yet to demonstrate their financial worth. They satisfied emotional needs that other toymakers had ignored. They found ways to produce smiles that others missed.

So follow the smiles. That was, and remains, the ultimate value of a blockbuster toy. Following the smiles will help you invent the Next Big Thing that millions of children and parents will embrace for generations. With that in mind, let us begin.