

YOUNG V&A

A MUSEUM...BUT NOT AS WE KNOW IT

Reflections on a visit by the editor

Pictures by the editor

Recently I have had reason to consider the place of toy trains in museum collections. What do such collections tell us about toy trains? Might be the first question that many collectors would ask. Do they have 'interesting' toy trains? Might be a second. While a third might be: Do they encourage interest in toy trains? This might be given a rider - amongst a younger generation? These questions and variations on them have dominated any discussion I have had regarding toy museums with other collectors. But, are they the right questions to ask? Looking at what could be considered to be the national repository of old toys in the UK, the Victoria & Albert Museum, I'd suggest they are not.

To many, the V&A is the UK's national museum of design and decorative arts in South Kensington, but since 1872 it has had a second site at Bethnal Green in the East End of London, originally intended to engage with a predominantly working-class population in a manufacturing area of the city. While it merely reflected South Kensington when it opened, by the end of the 1920s it was beginning to move towards toys. This was consolidated in the early 1970s when it became the V&A's Museum of Childhood, even though some general design and decorative arts remained. In the early 21st century the museum was enhanced with additional spaces, such as a learning centre, but it is only recently that the collection has had a complete reassessment and redisplay with the museum rebranded as the 'Young V&A'.

The first thing to note about the Young V&A is that it is no longer a toy museum in the way that many readers would imagine one. There are no cases devoted to particular item types, manufacturers and so on, nor media such as TV and film. Rather, the focus is on the design process, not so much in historiographic terms, but rather in encouraging its audience to think about how things are designed and to get involved in the design process; therefore, its main themes are along the lines of material, process and colour, as well as representations of the way we live. Quantity has been hugely reduced; according to their own blog, of some 30,000 objects moved into storage off-site, only 2000 had returned when the museum re-opened. <https://www.vam.ac.uk/blog/museum-life/young-va-transforming-the-building>



The main hall is completely bare, making it available for events and also making the interior bright and airy. The displays are to be found on its two surrounding galleries, but one side of the upper one is devoted to temporary exhibitions, reducing the 'permanent collection' still further. To the 'traditional' collector it is barely a museum at all. Were Mr Spock a toy collector, the phrase 'It's a museum, Jim, but not as we know it', would be particularly appropriate.

Having said that, the museum is quite traditional in the way it expects its audience to *look* at objects. There is very little in the way of electronic 'interactive' display, or indeed 'virtual' play, 'gaming'. This is a museum that is devoted to objects and hands-on making. Objects are still numbered and captioned with detail of title, material, date, place and name of maker and accession number. What we see in the Young V&A is traditional museology applied to a way of learning-through-objects that reflects current interests and understandings within its intended audience of three to fifteen year-olds, but with an educational formality that can engage older visitors.

So, where do the trains come in? The answer is: Not often. The best represented is Brio, which appears twice, with good reason as this type of train is still familiar to today's young people at a general (and to some extent) ungendered level. A very nice sheet of uncut Brimtoy 0 gauge 1920s signal boxes appears as part of a display on 'bossing' **Fig 1**. A Hornby 00 'Hogwarts Express' is to be found in another case entitled 'How are you going to get there?' **Fig 2**. Other than those, the only other trains to be found are under the theme 'Start your Engines' **Fig 3**; but, reflecting most children's experience of travel, railways are not even part of the introductory text **Fig 4**. The toy railway items within 'Start



Fig 2



Fig 3

Start your engines

Small vehicles are sometimes perfect copies of real ones. The difference is that a pocket-sized car can transport us to wherever we want to go in our imaginations.

Playing with mini cars and lorries isn't just about going places – we can also get better at sorting things into types, colours and sizes.

Fig 4



Fig 5



Fig 6



Fig 7

your Engines' comprise a Brio train, a small group of Hornby 0 gauge **Fig 5**, a Marx 0 gauge streamliner **Fig 6**, a Harris cast iron floor train **Fig 7**, a wooden pull along loco and tender, a tinplate Rossignol floor loco **Fig 8** and a very cheap Carette floor train **Figs 9 and 9a**. The fact the museum labels give 'unknown maker' to the latter two items, in spite of prominent 'CR' and 'GC&C' trademarks, might suggest a bit of sloppiness; but equally, is it important enough to care about?

None of the trains in the museum are particularly impressive in collecting terms, but do they need to be? Rather, they represent trains of different shapes and sizes. The only write-home train item to be found in the museum is a most charming 19th century, home-made, station diorama in a display devoted to town and cityscape. It is so lovely I felt it worth picturing elsewhere in this issue (See p18), but to many toy train collectors it would not register as a toy train at all and be seen as irrelevant.

A train collector might feel hard-done-by by the paucity of trains on display, but shouldn't. At least they are represented. In the old days there were cases of china-headed dolls, now there are none. Whole swathes of things that once would be a certainty in a toy museum, often those most prized by collectors, are no longer represented. Does anyone, other than a collector of them, notice? I suspect not. Effectively,



Fig 8

collecting as a whole is reduced to 28 *Masters of the Universe* figures collected by a child in the 1980s **Fig 10**. The interpretation merely asks 'Do you collect anything? Why is it special to you? ... What we collect and own says something about us and our lives, anything we group together can be a collection' **Fig 11**. In fact, elsewhere the only display that has any single item in quantity is an art installation by the sculptor, Rachel Whiteread; a hill town made from dozens of 20th century doll's houses of varying shapes and sizes. It's an assemblage, not a collection.



Fig 9

So, what has happened? Undoubtedly, there has been a massive generational shift. Model railways are no longer an expected childhood toy for boys, as they were in the 20th century. This means that a key factor that drove collectors of the past, nostalgia, is now absent. Moreover, collecting is not an expected childhood pastime as it was a couple of generations



Fig 9a

ago when every book on 'What can I do?' would give advice to children on collecting stamps, coins or whatever, mainly in an 'antiquarian' manner controlled by type-forms, variations and strict chronology. Without these two essentials younger generations are entirely distanced from trains and from collecting things in ways that previous generations would see as normal.

This is not to say there are not and will not be people drawn to collecting old toy trains. There will, but their numbers will be tiny in comparison to the late 20th century. The extraordinary thing about that time was that there were so many collectors and they



Fig 10



Fig 11

were comparatively young. Looking back to the 1970s when I was a teenager collecting Hornby 0 gauge, I was young in comparison to most of the 'collectorate' who were mainly over 30, with the dominant age group being 40-60. This reflects both the factors I mention above, a generation of boys to whom railways

and model railways were an expected part of their lives and who had been conditioned to collect things in an antiquarian fashion, re-finding their childhood interests as adults. In effect the situation has not changed much, merely that we have all got older. I'm in my sixties and the dominant age group is now literally dying off. What is clear is there is no equivalent following generation of collectors. This is most obviously illustrated at specialist auctions where, in general, prices have dropped by 50% or more of those of a generation ago and, in particular, rolling stock that once would have been desirable and easily sold at £10-30 (or more) an item is bundled into large lots of ten or more in the £40-60 range for the lot.

And that is what is so interesting and poignant about the displays at the Young V&A. The museum is a reminder of the fact that train collecting, of the sort that is the subject of the *TC*, is an obscure by-way, of interest to a rapidly reducing number of those of 'mature years' and a handful of those following, certainly not enough to merit any recognition in a national museum.