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Design History and the History of Toys: Defining a Discipline for the Bethnal Green Museum of Childhood

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Abstract

This article describes the development of the history of toys through a survey of the literature. It shows how this history originated in different

ways in France, Germany, and England, and involved contact with other disciplines such as folklore, ethnography, psychology, economic history, and sociology. The development of toy history is related to the policies and practices of the Bethnal Green Museum. Collections of toys were displayed in the South Kensington Museum in the 1850s, but their status within the Victoria and Albert Museum remained, for many decades, uncertain. 'Would not be wanted in our department' was a characteristic response to opportunities for acquisitions. Nevertheless, from an early stage, the V & A designated the Bethnal Green Museum (BGM) as the chief site for the display of toys, and the collections gradually grew. In the early 1970s, with the transfer to BGM of the V & A's holdings of children's clothes and furniture and the acquisition of the Renier Collection of some 80,000 children's publications, the museum became a specialist centre for the study of childhood. This status was recognized by its designation, in 1974, as the Bethnal Green Museum of Childhood. Yet its existence was to be called into question less than a decade later by the Rayner Scrutiny. BGM successfully made the case against closure. And, in the following decade, changing attitudes within the V & A made the status of the childhood collections less anomalous. More recently their particular significance as one of the largest such collections in the world has led to the redesignation of BGM as the National Museum of Childhood. The author outlines the history of the collections and their display and indicates how recent literature, together with the more inclusive intellectual approach which now obtains within the V & A, have given the BGM, though severely limited in its resources, a new sense of confidence and purpose.

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