

Vintage playthings defy economic downturn

The economy is waning. Gas prices are soaring.

Remarkably, though, in a time when the phrase "healthy economy" is an oxymoron, prices for antique toys at auction have bucked the trend, with two recent sales collectively bringing in close to \$4 million.

That's not really unusual, however, considering how the millennium began for the toy industry.

"Late last year, both Bertoia Auctions and Randy Inman Auctions - two companies specializing primarily in toys - tantalized buyers with a plethora of vintage Disneyana," said Sharon Korbeck, editorial director of *Toy Shop* magazine. "The prices realized in those events didn't disappoint."

Some Mickey Mouse rarities commanded six-figure prices. The German Mickey and Minnie on Motorcycle (with original box) brought \$110,000 at Inman and \$52,800 (sans box) at Bertoia. Another example of the toy brought \$26,400 at a Bertoia auction in May.

"Disney continued its strong showing with a rare German Mickey Mouse bank by Saalheimer & Strauss leading that Bertoia sale with a price of \$39,600," Korbeck said, "No wonder Mickey's got that wide-eyed smile."

Bertoia's sale generated over \$1.58 million, with Disney and vehicle toys being the true "babes in toyland."

One of the nostalgia winners at Bertoia was a cast-iron 1929 Packard Sedan by Hubley which brought \$12,550, despite having several replaced parts. An impressive Buddy L outdoor railroad set exceeded its presale estimate, selling for \$9,350.

Korbeck points out that an item's provenance often pays off big.

"Consider the sale earlier this year of the F.H. Griffith collection of robots," she said. "Griffith was a longtime collector of robot rarities, so when his estate was consigned by Sotheby's and sold in December (2000), it was no surprise that the collection topped \$1.4 million."

While a 1950s Jupiter Robot sold for \$45,600, the auction's cover lot - a battery-operated Mego Man - failed to sell. Its presale estimate was \$50,000 to \$70,000.

Even in times of astounding and often unfathomable prices realized, some toy treasures do go unsold. Why?

"Sometimes the hype is too much or unwarranted," Korbeck said. "Sometimes the items aren't quite as desirable as thought."

More often than not, however, auctions of vintage toys do provide buyers the unparalleled opportunity to buy back their childhoods.

at Christie's South Kensington, a single-owner collection of Britains soldiers recalled the days when toy soldiers were made with extreme quality and care. Many of the items were from the late 1800s, some still accompanied by their original boxes.

While an 1880s foot-race toy brought \$12,620, other items sold for considerably lower prices. A complete 32-piece set of Cadbury Cococub premiums from the 1930s brought \$2,710.

"Familiar childhood toys are constantly generating fodder for auction houses," Korbeck said. "In fact, one large collection of delicate and colorful penny toys is slated to hit the auction block this summer at Noel Barrett Antiques in Pennsylvania."

Not all vintage toys, of course, have the distinction of commanding four or five-figure prices. But that doesn't mean they're not just as loved.

Lesser-condition toys, decorated with the dents and bruises of heavy use, still send chills down bidders' spines. For example, a striking Steelcraft Roadster pedal car sold at Bertoia for a reasonable \$770. A whimsical Steiff crow, circa 1952, was a great steal for \$160 at Sloan's. A charming tin Snow White dime bank cost a mere \$75 at Henry/Peirce.

"With the number of quality toys being offered each year, and the apparent growing interest in the hobby, any imminent dog days seem unlikely." predicts Korbeck.

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