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Best Buys

## Toy collectors are getting in on the action

### Nostalgia is driving the market as fans collect the toys from their childhood, says Nick Kettles

03 July 2004

In April this year, Lady Penelope's, pink Rolls-Royce - from the cult television classic, *Thunderbirds* - with fully functioning steering wheel, headlamps and leather seats, fetched £80,000 at a sale of film and TV collectables hosted at Planet Hollywood. Just a month later, a plastic replica of the same FAB 1 car, made in Hong Kong in the early Seventies, sold at a Bonhams' Knightsbridge toy auction for a more affordable £239.

While nostalgia has fuelled the market for original film and television memorabilia beyond the reach of most pockets, it has yet to price out collectors from a newer emerging space - popular boys toys of the Sixties and Seventies that one would expect to find at jumble sales.

Indeed, surprisingly, it's possible the FAB 1 replica was almost as rare as the original. For those who remember, "made in Hong Kong" was once synonymous with, well... not being very good; mass-produced moulded plastic was usually brittle and prone to cracking.

There are therefore likely to be few mint examples of "m'lady's" car available, or, of the many thousands of fire engines, caravans, water pistols, glasses, *Dr Who* Daleks, Vauxhall Victor cars and other toys made by companies like Rosenthal's and Lincoln's. Keegan Harrison, a toy specialist at the auctioneers Bonhams says: "Hong Kong plastics are an emerging space, if you have them - intact - then keep them safe, they are evocative of the age."

Compared to more established toy collector items, such as railway sets, teddy bears, dolls houses, Dinky and Corgi cars, experts note that in addition to Hong Kong plastics, Subbuteo, Scalextric, and especially Action Man, the world's first doll for boys, are beginning to attract considerable interest. Leigh Gotch, Head of Toys at auctioneers, Bonhams says: "It's a 30-year cycle. There are lots of people in their 30s and 40s with disposable income and their instinct is to collect the toys of their childhood."

Nigel Gregory, senior partner, at The Board Game Company, in Newport Pagnell,

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says demand for classic board games, like *Buccaneer* and *Formula One*, is also being fuelled by nostalgia, but not in the same way. "Parents aged between 30 and 50 realise their children are not playing the same games and so are buying the board games of their childhood - sometimes as actual Christmas presents - as an alternative to computers and PS2," he said.

There is still a surfeit of supply of all these toys, as a cursory glance at eBay will confirm, but not many in very good to mint condition, which are beginning to demand good sums and more if they are boxed. At the same Bonhams' toy sale, two early-1970s sailor Action Man dolls, one with HMS *Renown* on his hatband, the other with HMS *Dreadnought*, fetched over £100 each. Leigh Gotch, adds: "Action Man dolls are a safer investment because they haven't quite reached their true potential yet. There is still some way to go. We're looking at three to five years."

Collectors note that since Action Man's 25th anniversary in 1991, when the market first began to establish itself, prices have appreciated by 300 to 400 per cent. Glen Chapman, owner of the Unique Collections shop in Greenwich, says: "In 1994 an unboxed Blues and Royals Action Man, in full ceremonial uniform on a horse in excellent condition, could fetch £150-£200. Today I could sell the same item for £500-£600."

With Action Man set to celebrate the Big-4-0 in two years' time, collectors expect prices to rise.

In making their selection, potential investors should also note where demand for a particular toy is defined by niche interest groups and where it is bolstered by collectors of toys by type. For example collectors of toy cars might consider some boxed Scalextric cars from the Sixties, like the Aston Martin "Marshall" car which can fetch over £200, or the Mini Cooper which demands at least £100. Collectors of football memorabilia might consider Subbuteo teams (in the green cardboard box), of which the more obscure examples during the 1965-81 "heavyweight" period, like York City or Barnet, can demand over £50. As can other rare examples, such as Subbuteo's attempt during the Seventies to reflect the racial integration of the game by including black players for the first time.

Collectors of cinema and broadcast memorabilia, will look at board games based around popular films and TV shows in the same way as models and signed photos. For example, in the early Sixties, Chad Valley Co produced board games taken from the BBC radio serial *The Archers* and the classic television programme *Hancock's Half Hour*. Games like these tended to have smaller print runs, which further assures their desirability. Good examples are currently changing hands for up to £100.

In general, demand for board games as collectors' items is not as established as other toys as they are considered difficult to display. But while they are so cheap investors might still consider a few carefully selected examples. Avoid those still in production today, like *Cluedo*, *Monopoly* and *Risk*, and of those that sold widely, like *Buccaneer* and *Formula One*, only consider first and second edition copies in mint condition. As popular games it is likely they were played regularly ensuring fewer copies without a damaged box. It's likely first edition copies of more obscure games like *Railroader*, *Go*, *Scoop*, *Careers*, *Air Charter*, and *Mine A Million* will be in better condition. Items like these can currently be found from as little as £25 privately, to £50 to £80 from reputable dealers.

However, Keegan Harrison says: "The exciting area at the moment is the turn of the century board games, based around the technical marvels and innovations of the age: aeroplanes, zeppelins, dreadnoughts and cars. It is the pieces - often made of lead - that make them special."

For example *Aviation*, produced by HP Gibson & Sons, c.1918 is now considered very rare. The game is based on aerial tactics of attack and defence, with a wide selection of First World War biplanes, aircraft and airships playing pieces. Complete games in good condition demand £250, and more, at auction.

Like any alternative investment, expert advice is of the essence to mitigate your risk. With the exception of Action Man, there are no catalogues for any of the

items mentioned, but common sense should prevail before making any purchase. Research your chosen toy thoroughly through professional dealers and trade publications such as *The Collectors Gazette* and *Model & Collectors Mart*. These magazines also list trade fairs which will allow you to inspect items first hand as well as compare prices.

Serious collectors say that good examples are increasingly hard to find at jumble and car boot sales, and yet, if you don't look....

So do not rule out the family attic and older relatives' and holiday homes, where toys may have survived in better condition.

And as for space hoppers, pogo sticks and rusty chopper bikes? Probably best left in the garage. Unless your children have already found them.

'Action Man - The real story 1966-96', by Kevin King. [www.cairo-cafe.com](http://www.cairo-cafe.com)

[www.uniquecollections.co.uk](http://www.uniquecollections.co.uk) 0208 305 0867

### HOW TO PLAY THE GAME

- \* Do monitor demand through auction sales and internet news.
- \* Don't buy job lots of toys unless it contains at least one item of considerable value.
- \* Do extend your home contents insurance, or take out separate cover for which you will need a letter from an established authority confirming the sums insured.
- \* Don't rely solely on chatrooms and news groups to talk directly to collectors for your research. Seek them out face to face at trade fairs.
- \* Don't store items in direct sunlight or damp conditions.

### 'My collection's worth at least £50,000'

Kevin King, 47, from Brighton, has been collecting Action Man dolls for 15 years, since his wife pointed out one for sale in a charity shop. Since then he has become one of "a hard core" of 2,300 collectors in the UK and several thousand others with an ongoing interest.

He says: "The truth is these toys were genuinely good toys based on original ideas. Action Man was the first doll for boys. It's their realism that makes them so collectable, and what made them so popular during their day."

Although Action Man had painted hair when he was first launched in the UK in 1966 by Palitoy - a distinctly British cousin to the American GI Joe - he quickly acquired more realistic "flock hair" in 1970, the familiar grip hands in 1973, and moving "eagle" eyes by the end of the decade.

As author of *Action Man - The real story 1966-96*, Kevin King is the first collector to offer a price and rarity guide. His collection of 250 Action Men, from the Sixties, Seventies and Eighties, is currently valued at at least £50,000, a figure he points out has been verified by other special- ists, and has never depreciated.

In terms of potential return, he suggests seeking out good examples of Action Man up until the mid-Seventies. He says: "In all instances, uniforms should be complete, joints in working order, and rubber hands not perished. And while collectors obviously like boxed items, they will not disregard unboxed items." Indeed, Action Man offers a much wider range of desirable items in general. Mr King cites a single belt for the Argyll and Sutherland Highlander outfit, which recently sold for £90, to underline his point. Vehicles, too are worth considering. Several items, including the Go-Kart, Personnel Carrier, and Apollo Space Capsule will fetch more than £150. An extremely rare, boxed, Green Racing Car will fetch up to £800.

- \* Kevin King's Action Man Top Five (mint boxed examples)

1. Aston Villa footballer (£500)
2. Space Explorer (£500),
3. Racing Car driver (£200), below
4. Judo Action Man (£500)
5. Olympic Champion (£500)

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