Childhood by Design: Toys &the Material Culture

Deadline: Mar 31, 2016

Megan Brandow-Faller

Childhood by Design: Toys and the Material Culture of Childhood, 1700-present (edited volume)

Notions of sentimentality, nostalgia and timelessness cling to toys and the material world of childhood. In his landmark 1928 cultural history of toys, German art historian Karl Gröber framed playthings as material remnants of an illusionary landscape of child's play that could never be regained by adults. To Gröber and other scholars taking an early interest in the material world of play, children throughout the ages shared universal preferences for simple, even crude, playthings intended for vigorous use. It was only adults' inability to understand children's supposed proclivity for simplicity that resulted in what cultural theorist Walter Benjamin likened to a monstrous proliferation of elaborate, factory-produced technological miniatures entirely unsuited to creative play. Despite the ways in which childhood has been viewed through such universalizing lenses, notions of children, childhood and the material world surrounding them are not static but historically and culturally specific.

Groundbreaking social-historical scholarship on the invention of childhood as a distinct stage of human development, most notably Philippe Ariès's Centuries of Childhood, looked to the material artifacts of childhood and infancy as important evidence for widely-held, if rarely verbalized, attitudes towards children. Preceding mid twentieth-century social historians' interest in the historical recognition of childhood, a separate genre of literature took shape that made understudied objects like miniatures, dollhouses and tin soldiers the explicit focus of study. But such early toy histories, aimed primarily at toy collectors, were remarkably unconcerned with socio-cultural constructions of childhood. Only more recently have toys and the material culture of childhood emerged as an important category for serious scholarly inquiry. Informed by developments in the fields of childhood studies, sociology, archaeology and material culture studies, much of this growing body of interdisciplinary literature has scrutinized how toys reflected broader cultural norms of childhood and play. Accommodating more than children's immediate physical needs, distinct forms of furniture, clothing and playthings evolved in response to adult perceptions of children's changing needs. Such literature has likewise revealed that the toy's exclusive linkages with the realm of childhood represented a distinctly modern phenomenon in contrast to conceptual fluidity between automata, luxury miniatures and other early modern adult amusements, themes popularized through a series of recent museum exhibitions.

Informed by the analytical practices of the interdisciplinary 'material turn,' the projected volume Childhood By Design: Toys and the Material Culture of Childhood invites new approaches to the material world of childhood and design culture for children. Childhood by Design solicits essays that situate toys and design culture for children within broader narratives on art, design and the

decorative arts, where toy design has traditionally been viewed as an aberration from more serious pursuits. The projected volume seeks contributions that treat toys not merely as unproblematic reflections of socio-cultural constructions of childhood but consider how design culture actively shaped, commodified and materialized shifting discursive constellations surrounding childhood and children. As such, the present volume seeks to explore dynamic tensions between theory and practice, discursive constructions and lived experience as embodied in the material culture of childhood. Contributions from and between a variety of disciplinary perspectives (including history, art history, material cultural studies, decorative arts, design history, and childhood studies) are welcome, but those that critically link historical discourses of childhood with close study of material objects and design culture for children are particularly encouraged.

Chronologically, the volume spans the 18th century, which witnessed the invention of the toy as an educational plaything and a proliferation of new material artifacts designed expressly for children's use; through the 19th-century expansion of factory-based methods of toy production facilitating accuracy in miniaturization and a new vocabulary of design objects coinciding with the recognition of childhood innocence and physical separation within the household; towards the intersection of early 20th-century child-centered pedagogy and modernist approaches to nursery and furniture design; through the changing consumption and sales practices of the postwar period marketing directly to children through television, film and other digital media; and into the present, where the line between the material culture of childhood and adulthood is increasingly blurred. Although much of the literature on the invention of childhood assumes an implicitly Western perspective, the projected volume welcomes contributions that broach the topic from a global perspective.

Potential topics might include, but are not limited to:
• Competing notions of the 'educational toy' in theory and practice (Locke, Pestalozzi, Fröbel, Montesorri, etc.)
• Objects such as miniatures, dollhouses, and card games whose historical usage has fluctuated between children and adults
• Critical studies of the materiality and ephemerality of toys
• Dialogues between changing conceptions of child nature, expected behavior and formal/stylistic developments in clothing, furniture, toy design, childrearing accessories and other ephemera
• Avant-garde interventions in toy and children's furniture design and fascination with dolls, puppets and automata
• Nurseries, schools and playspaces as sites of architectural innovation
• Modernist constructions of childhood, children's creativity and the 'childlike' as metaphors for artistic newness
• Toys, play and design culture as instruments of political or ideological indoctrination
• Connoisseurship and the collecting practices of individuals and institutions, including objects by children and amateur makers
• Intermedial linkages between toys and popular culture, particularly the postwar 'character toy' derived from films, animated television series and comic books and/or challenges to this pre-prescribed narrativization of play
• Constructions of race, gender and class in children's playthings, as well as alternative toys reclaiming pejorative stereotypes
• Essays addressing the tension between 'children's material culture' (objects made or adapted by

children for their own use) and ‘the material culture of childhood’ (objects made by adults expressly for children’s use)

Potential contributors should send a 300 word abstract, brief bio and curriculum vitae as a single pdf document to childhoodbydesign@gmail.com by 31 March 2016. Final essays are limited to 6,000 words and may include two black-and-white images; inclusion of further images is under negotiation. Completed essays will be due 15 December 2016. Pending acceptance of the final project, the volume is slated to appear with a leading academic press with a strong reputation in visual studies and design.

Please direct any inquiries to Megan Brandow-Faller, Associate Professor of History at the City University of New York/Kingsborough, at childhoodbydesign@gmail.com

Reference:

CFP: Childhood by Design: Toys &the Material Culture. In: ArtHist.net, Feb 14, 2016 (accessed Nov 10, 2026), <https://arthist.net/archive/12223>.