

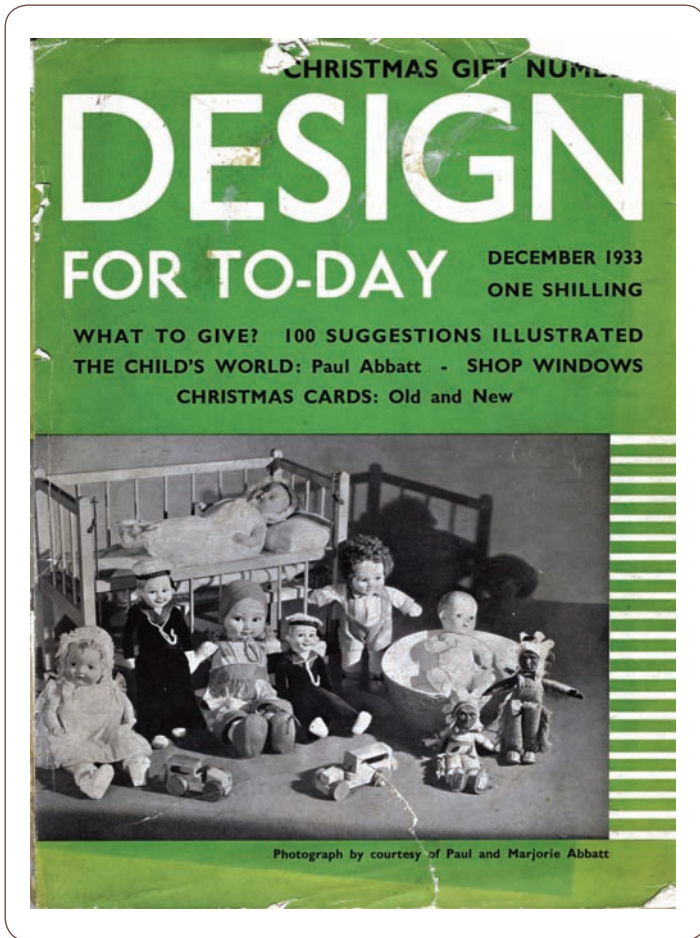
Resource Sheet Modern Toys

Modern artists, designers and architects have often been interested in toys – collecting them as sources of ideas, or sometimes designing them. The idea of toys that are ‘modern’ in this sense brings together the research of child psychologists and educators with the desire of designers to capture reality not through detail but through simplification and the search for essentials. Indeed, the perceptions of children, before they are over-conditioned by their surroundings, have always been important for the whole idea of modernism.

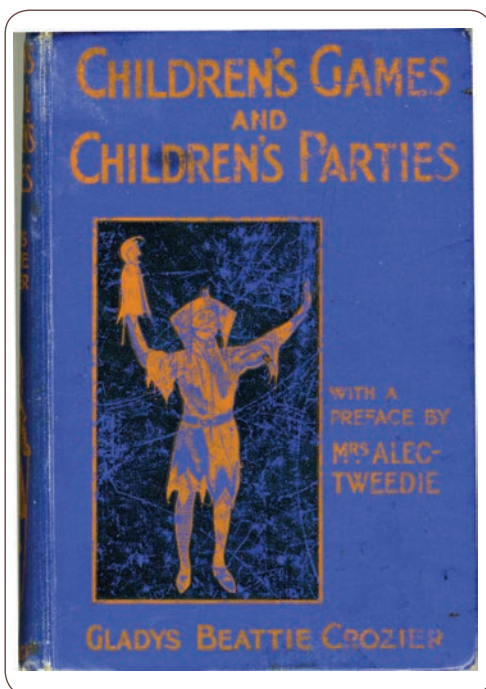
This resource sheet contains information about modern toys, especially those made in Britain.

Modern British Toys – Paul and Marjorie Abbatt

One of Pollock’s Toy Museum Trust’s cards is taken from a ‘playtray’ puzzle of a car produced in the 1930s by Paul and Marjorie Abbatt. This coincides with two other events involving the Abbatts. At the end of 1998, the V&A Museum of Childhood acquired the archive of this company along with other British toy producers’ archives, and it is currently being catalogued. During August 1999, a small exhibition opened in the nursery of the Ernö Goldfinger house at 2 Willow Road, Hampstead, owned by the National Trust, showing Abbatt Toys, including some designed by Goldfinger,



Design for Today, December 1933, front cover



Children’s Games and Children’s parties, front cover



From Modern British Toys. Caption reads: *A climbing frame not only develops children physically but benefits them psychologically by making a sense of fear unknown. This one consists of a climbing tower for the most adventurous: a section with climbing ropes; and a platform under which children find a “den,” while on top of it they hoist bricks and sand and become architects.*

LEARN ABOUT TOYS

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Modern British Toys

one of the leading modern architects in England in the 1930s who also designed the Abbatt shop. This exhibition will run until the summer of 2010.

When the Abbatt archive is available to researchers, there will be opportunities to understand and appreciate their contribution to play and education.

We are reproducing an article by Paul Abbatt, 'The Child's World' from the magazine Design for Today, December 1933, which introduced members of the design community in Britain to the early Abbatt products, some of which remained in production until the 1960s. These were not 'designer toys' in the current sense, but were carefully researched in terms of children of different ages. They were strikingly and deliberately different to the toys available in shops of the time.

One of the picture captions refers to H. G. Wells's book Floor Games, from which the Abbatts took the design of their wooden building bricks. Floor Games was published in 1911, about ten years after Wells became famous with books such as Anticipations and The Time Machine. He was interested in architecture (he commissioned a house in Sandgate, Kent, from C. F. A. Voysey, a leading Arts and Crafts architect) and in the idea of reforming every aspect of life. Floor Games was clearly based on his experience of playing with his two

sons, born in 1901 and 1903. Are they the boys on the cover?

'We don't think very much of the toyshops', he wrote, because in his view they did not supply the simple wooden blocks, boards and planks he considered essential for playing improvised games with model soldiers, boats and animals on the floor. Wells describes a set of bricks made by 'a deserving unemployed carpenter' in Plymouth for some other children that had been passed on to Wells's family. In his criticism of the building bricks available from toyshops, he was probably thinking of Richter's Anchor Blocks, 'skimpy, sickly, ridiculous pseudo-boxes of bricklets.' He even blamed these bricks for the low quality of suburban house design.

The simple cubic shapes of Wells's blocks were in tune with most progressive architecture of his time, although the results were not clearly seen in buildings such as the London Underground stations until the 1930s.

The style of Wells's text is facetious and rather laboured, but the underlying idea – that toys should allow plenty of room for imagination and variety – still seems a sound one.



Modern British Toys



Poleidoblocs

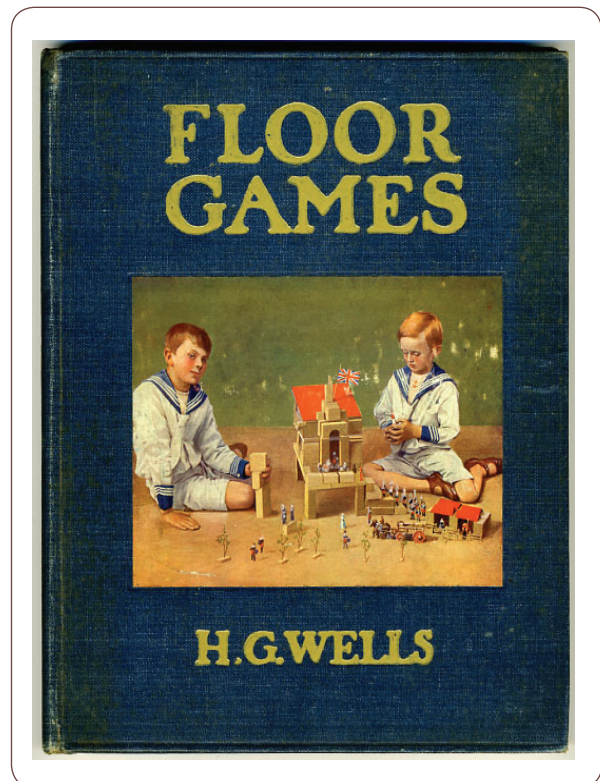
Two years later, he published *Little Wars* in which the same blocks are used, but the game, perhaps befitting slightly older children, is more formalised. Wells added an appendix comparing his home-developed games with *Kriegspiel*, as played by the British army as part of their training. In view of the outbreak of real war in 1914, it is rather chilling. Today's war gamers acknowledge Wells's *Little Wars* as the origin of their activities.

Floor Games had a surprising sequel in the work of Dr Margaret Lowenfeld, (1890-1973), paediatrician and child psychologist. She used Wells's idea of imaginative free play with model animals, figures and sand as a way of diagnosing child patients and drawing out things they could not express in words. She called this *The World Technique*.

In the 1950s, Lowenfeld developed Poleidoblocs, which 'consist of 54 coloured wooden blocks shaped as cubes, cuboids, cylinders, triangular prisms, cones and pyramids. They are made of wood and come in four colours, red, blue, yellow and green. They are pleasant and attractive both to hold and to use because they are precisely made and are in proportion to each other.'

Useful links

- www.lowenfeld.org



Floor Games, H.G. Wells