

WAR IN THE CHILDREN'S ROOM

APRIL 3RD 2014 – NOVEMBER 2ND 2014



Playing war, build fortresses, having a fight between cowboys and Indians, let pirates sink a ship, beat Darth Vader in a light saber battle, ... With a little bit of fantasy, a children's room can become the ideal setting for all kind of dangerous adventures. In memory of the commemoration of the 100th anniversary of WW 1, the Toy Museum Mechelen organizes a unique exhibit about war toys throughout the centuries.

The commemoration of WW 1 is the obvious reason for this exhibit. But the intent goes beyond that. Different eras of history are mentioned as far as they inspired kids in their game.

Why war toys?

Toy soldiers together with building sets, toy trains and computer games are considered as typical toys for boys.

But there has always been some resistance towards this kind of toys. According to some it might lead to aggression. Others think it's a way for kids to get rid of their energy.

But knights, cowboys and Indians, playing war, ... are a very important part of our game culture. It is therefore evident that the Toy Museum shows this kind of toys in an objective manner both in the museum's permanent collection as well as in this specific exhibit.

But the visitor, whether young or old, will realize that playing war or playing with soldiers isn't always that innocent.



1. KNIGHTS

Knights, Vikings, etc. give an overview of Military History from prehistoric times until Waterloo.



The first wars in history

There is a general agreement that the first wars took place many thousands of years ago. Excavations showed that a large amount of people died a violent death back then whether or not caused by the acts of war.

War: battle between good and evil.

Myths from all over the world are filled with stories of wars. In the Greek mythology there is the Clash of the Titans, the war between the Gods and the Titans. In Christianity the fall of the rebellious angels can be seen considered as the first war. In fantasy literature and movies war is an important part of the story. One very famous example of this is the saga of 'Lord of the Rings'.

Egyptians, Greek, Romans, Gaul and Germans

Kids love this fantastic classical ancient period with pyramids, temples, arenas, Gaul and German heroes. In ancient Egypt, the battle of Megiddo (1457 before Christ) is recounted in the temple of Karnak. It is the oldest war report in World History. Within the history of the Greek and the Romans, the siege of Troje is the highlight. In our Patriotic History, we learn that Caesar conquers Gaul and that the Belgians are the bravest. Our biggest hero is Ambiorix, number 4 on the list of greatest Belgians.

Knights and castles

'The lion of Flanders' by Hendrik Conscience, King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table, Ivanhoe, The Red Knight, Robin Hood, ... These are all heroes that the boys just love. Castles with watchtowers, battlements, fences and drawbridges add extra fun to the game. The 'Knight Period' spans a period of nearly a 1 000 years with Vikings, Crusaders, Knights and servants. A highlight of this specific period is "The Battle of the Guilder Spurs" in 1302, which was beautifully reenacted in the movie "De Witte van Zichem" (= a Flemish movie).

What was the name of the victor of Waterloo again?

Many don't know the answer to this question. Everybody knows the loser: Napoleon. During the Napoleon Wars from 1804 until 1815, Napoleon books victory after victory at first and conquers the whole of Europe that way. But in the campaign against Russia, he has to return home inglorious and with great losses of men. His return from exile leads to the ultimate defeat of the French in Waterloo. The victor of this battle is Arthur Wellesley, the first Duke of Wellington.

2. 'MODERN' WARFARE

The big wars: starting from the French-German war (1870-71) until the more recent conflicts



Playing prior to World War I

After the Congress of Vienna (1814-1815) Europe is shaped. This is accompanied by numerous armed conflicts. From 1900 onwards everybody in Europe knows that war is coming.

In their play kids at both sides of the party prepare for the war. A career at the military is considered a honor and so is playing war.

The Big War

On the 4th of August 1914 Germany attacks Belgium. There is heavy resistance, but Belgium is conquered rather quickly except for the Iron Valley. War doesn't just happen at the front. At home and at school children of all parties learn how cruel and violent the enemy really is. Toys become scarce. Toy fabrics are now used in the war industry. Kids or their parents often make their own toys instead. The effects of the World War are shocking. Nobody wants war anymore and war toys are banished ... but they will return again in large numbers from the 1930-ies onwards.

Approximately 20 years later World War II begins

In the 1930-ies a new world conflict is about to start and war toys is 'hot' again in Europe. On May 10 1940 Germany attacks Belgium. The big toy manufacturers in the belligerent countries are used in the production of war supplies. Only in countries that are being occupied toys is still manufactured for instance Unica dolls in Belgium and wooden Lego toys in Denmark. In 1944 the English and the American liberate Belgium. Everyone who knows anything about carpentry makes wooden airplanes, tanks and jeeps with the license plates of the Allies, the so-called 'Allies Toys'.

After World War II

After World War II kids play the victory over the Germans for over decades. The peace movement of the 1970-ies makes the classical war toys disappear. The 'modern' war appears again in 1984 with G.I. Joe who has a wide array of weapons.

3. WAR IN DE FUTURE

Science fiction toys from the 1950-ies and 1960-ies and the obvious Star Wars figurines

On October 30 1938 the Earth is attacked by Martians. At least that is what many people believe after the broadcast of the radio play "The War of the Worlds" on the American radio. At that moment in time the very first toy Martians appear. The first flying saucers are signaled by the end of the 1940-ies. This is the beginning of the mass production of tin science fiction toys such as armed robots and spacecrafts. The space war becomes popular again with the Star Wars movies and the same counts for its toys. With more new Star Wars movies to come the popularity will grow even more.



4. COWBOYS AND INDIANS

A fixed value since Buffalo Bill traveled through Europe in the 1900.

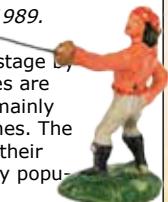
Between 1889 and 1906, Buffalo Bill and his Wild West show traveled through Europe 8 times. During that same period the books by Karl May become super popular too. Child-sized tin toy figurines and wigwams are available as of then in toy stores. Western movies with famous actors such as John Wayne and Gary Cooper are extremely popular. The American civil war (1861-65) is known in Europe by movies (Gone with the Wind) and television series (North & South). They kids can read all about cowboys and Indians in books and comic books or play with toy figurines. Most of all they love to play Cowboy and Indian themselves. Western figurines are made from the 1900 successively from tin, metal, papier maché and plastic. Playmobil follows in 1974.



5. PIRATES

A more recent phenomenon since Playmobil launched its pirate ship in 1984 and Lego in 1989.

Piracy already existed in the era of the Greek and the Romans. Caesar has been taken hostage by pirates and he ends up killing them all. The pirates we know from literature and the movies are in fact buccaneers who were active in the 17th century in the Caribbean seas. They are mainly targeting Spanish and French ships. There were hardly any pirates in the early toy figurines. The pirate theme only becomes popular when Playmobil (in 1984) and Lego (in 1989) release their first versions of the pirates. They fight against the soldiers of the 'governor'. More recently popular thanks to the Disney trilogy 'Pirates of the Caribbean'.



Marc verhaegen

Throughout the exhibit drawings reflect the fantasy of the child. While walking around in the exhibit you are traveling through (war) time. It is an exciting lesson in world history. The toys are placed in their historic context. Cartoon designer Marc Verhaegen is responsible for these 9 beautiful illustrations. He is well known as the author and designer of the comic series "Senne and Sanne" and he used to be the lead designer of "Suske and Wiske". These artworks created by Marc Verhaegen give a totally surprising and playful nature to the exhibit. The exhibit covers a total of about 205 square meters.



A medal of war has two sides

War toys often only shows the shiny side of the medal and tends to glorify the war. But the medal also has a dull side. Every critical visitor will no doubt have raised questions about the sense and the nonsense of this kind of toy.

Or how toys prompts us to think ...

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Met steun van de
Vlaamse overheid

