Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

TWENTIETH CENTURY TOYS H308/A

Late 1940's Humming Top



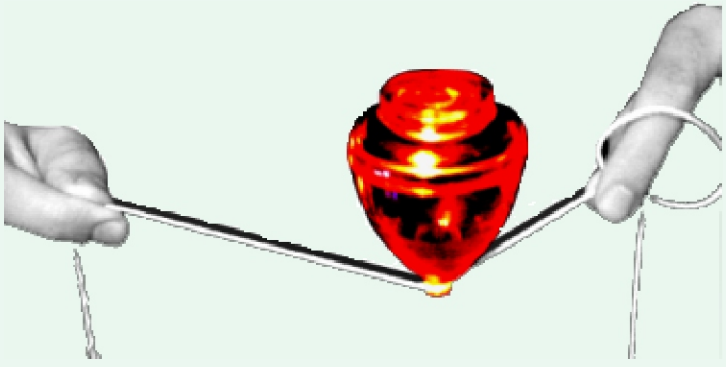
Spinning tops were toys designed for children. They were usually made out of wood or metal and were spun either by hand, by pulling a string or by twisting a stick. Tops are still in use today, but they are not as popular as they used to be. Nowadays they are usually made out of plastic with ball bearings inside to ensure a longer spin.

This top was made from tinplate in the late 1940's and would spin on its point when the handle was pushed up and down. It was called a humming top because it has a number of holes in the side and when air passes over these holes a low humming sound is created. You can make a similar sound by blowing over the top of an open bottle.

The act of spinning a top creates a gyroscopic effect so that it does not fall over. This is because when the top is spun, forces push against the top from all sides which keep it spinning on its point. However, as soon as a top runs out of speed the forces become unbalanced and the top falls over.

On the right is an example of a spinning top called a dreidel: a four-sided, hand-spun spinning top used during the Jewish holiday of Hanukkah.





On the left is a more modern, plastic spinning top being spun using string.

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1950's Model boat

This plastic 14 inch model *Thames Cabin Cruiser* allowed children to play with boats on a pond without having to wait for a windy day. Even though the boat didn't have a working rudder, and so couldn't be steered, the clockwork motor could be wound by a key and made the propeller turn. This would drive the boat forward in a straight line.



The company that made this boat were called Tri-ang and were owned by the Lines Bros. Ltd. This toy company eventually grew to become one of the most famous toy companies, owning some best-known British toys, such as Sindy dolls, Scalextric, Meccano, Hornby train sets and Dinky cars.

1960's Model Yacht



Full-sized yacht racing dates back to 1851 with the first *America's Cup*, the oldest active trophy in international sport. Model yacht racing began shortly after in 1853. This 1960's model yacht is made out of wood with a simple design, and would have been relatively inexpensive to buy and easy to use. Unlike the 1950's model boat, this model yacht did not have any sort of motor or engine and relied on the wind to catch the sail. Without any way of controlling the yacht, a successful day's sailing relied a lot on luck.

Since the 1960's, model yachts developed substantially, incorporating detailed rigging, counter-balances and, eventually, radio controls. In the twenty first century, model yacht racing is a far more technical sport and is not simply a childhood pastime. It usually involves individuals carefully designing and making their own custom built yachts from lightweight materials. These radio-controlled yachts can cost thousands of pounds to build and competitors from across the world take part in annual World Championships (right).



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1950's Toy Bugle



This toy belongs to the brass instrument family and we think it is meant to mimic a military bugle.

A trumpet normally has three valves that are used to change the note or pitch of the sound made. This instrument does not have any valves, so the player would have to use their facial muscles and the shape of their lips to change the sound.

There is a type of trumpet without valves that is called a 'natural trumpet', but that would have been a lot longer than this instrument. It is more likely that this was meant to be a copy of a bugle.



Originally, a bugle was used in the military to signal the start of an attack or relay messages from officers to the troops. Even in the twenty first century, a bugle is still used to indicate the daily routines of camp, but it is more well known for playing the *Last Post*; a bugle call used at British and Commonwealth military funerals and ceremonies to commemorate those who have been killed in war.

The cord would allow the player to either wear it around the neck or wrap around the wrist when playing. Children would have used this toy bugle when playing "a game of soldiers".

Bugle Corporal James Christopher, Royal Marines, sounds the *Last Post* at the unveiling of the British Cyprus Memorial, on Remembrance Sunday, 8 November 2009. (Pictured on the left)

1968 Jack-in-the-box



A Jack-in-the-box is a popular children's toy that consists of a box with a handle on the outside. When the handle is turned it plays a melody, often *Pop Goes the Weasel*, much like a music box. However, unlike a normal music box, this box holds a 'surprise'; at the end of the melody the lid of the box opens and the 'Jack', usually a clown or jester, pops out of the box. The Jack-in-the-box is one of the best known toys that uses a spring to make it move. When the lid is pushed closed the spring is compressed; when it is opened the spring is released and the toy jumps up as far as the spring allows.

Although it is not known exactly where the name 'Jack-in-the-box' comes from, the toy can be dated back to the Middle Ages. It may originate from an English thirteenth century clergyman who allegedly locked the devil in to a boot to protect his village. This may explain why the French phrase for the toy is 'Un diable en boîte' - a boxed devil.



This example was made by Burbank Toys, and licensed by the American toy company Mattel. Established in 1945, Mattel originally produced picture frames, but the company soon realised their future lay in toys after some success designing dollhouse furniture. In 1959 they made their breakthrough with the invention of the *Barbie* doll (left).

Mattel continued to grow and made another leap forward by introducing the *Hot Wheels* die-cast toy cars. By 1968 Mattel was one of the most famous toy companies in the world and included modern and more traditional toys, such as this one, in its wide range.

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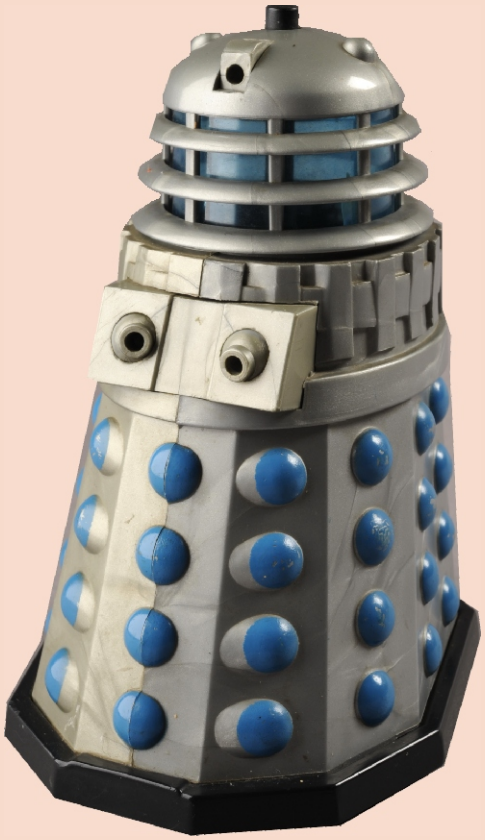
1975 Talking Dalek



First shown on television in 1963, the science-fiction programme *Doctor Who* was produced by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and has since grown to become one of the most popular television series with a loyal fanbase, appealing to both children and adults alike. The Dalek is the oldest enemy of *Doctor Who*. They are cyborgs from the planet Skaro bent on universal conquest and domination. Created by writer Terry Nation and designer Raymond Cusick, the Daleks first appeared in the second *Doctor Who* serial and are *Doctor Who*'s oldest enemy.

This Dalek was a talking toy made in Hong Kong by the Japanese toy company Takara Tomy Co. Ltd, but sold by the British toy company Palitoy. When the button on the top was pressed the Dalek would say one of the four most common Dalek phrases: “Exterminate!”, “What are your orders?”, “Attack! Attack! Attack!” and “You will obey!”.

Today in the twenty first century, talking toys use voice chips. However, in 1975 recordings had to be made on a miniature internal battery-operated record player, and automatically played when the button was pressed. This usually meant that this toy was a premium toy and would have been quite expensive at the time.



The Daleks have three fixed wheels on the base to enable them to be pushed around. The eye stalk moved up and down only, while the gun and arm fit into ball joints. Unfortunately the eyestalk, gun and arm are missing on this example, but perhaps this shows just how popular a toy it was to play with!