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# THE MATERIAL CULTURE OF CHILDREN AND CHILDHOOD

## Understanding Childhood Objects in the Museum Context

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### *Abstract*

This article examines the issues and problems surrounding the material culture of children and childhood, with the aim of making children more visible within material culture studies. It presents results from recent research examining such material culture within the accredited museum collections of mainland Britain, and compares the data from this study to expectations and statements made in the small body of existing literature in this field. Evidence is offered to both challenge and confirm ideas, and new perspectives on this area are offered, notably that 'the material culture of children' and 'the material culture of childhood' should be considered distinguishable and separate entities.

*Key Words* ◆ childhood ◆ children ◆ collections ◆ museum ◆ toys

### INTRODUCTION: CHILDREN, CHILDHOOD AND MATERIALITY

In 1550, Thomas Beacon asked 'what is a child or to be a child?' (Cunningham, 2006: 12); we are still asking these questions today. In the strict etymological sense, 'a child' is someone who is at the age of not yet being able to talk, from the Latin *in-fans*, 'not speaking' (Durkheim, 1982: 146). As children pass through a series of well-marked biological and psychological stages during their development – including learning to talk – this is perhaps not such a bad place to start considering the child. Such stages of development are one way of determining who is a

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child, by using biological markers as a way of delineating between children at different stages of growth. From another perspective, a child may be someone who is not of an age to be criminally responsible or to be able to vote, who is not able to be independent yet, or who has not acquired physical or psychological maturity; someone then in the liminal state between birth and full societal participation. 'Children' is also a word used to describe a group in relation to the norm (adults), and which covers a large number of individuals whose abilities and level of dependence span a wide range (Lucy, 1994: 22), but the length of this period can vary considerably between gender, culture, historical period and circumstance. For example, documentary sources put the age of maturity during the Anglo-Saxon period at between 10 and 12 years (p. 23), while, in Reformation England, childhood was thought to end at around 14 years (Cunningham, 2006: 81), and modern British society puts the age of majority at 18 years, although this age is currently 20 years in Japan and 21 years in the state of Mississippi, USA. This variation is due to ideas of appropriate behaviour, future roles and cultural expectations of what the child is capable of in the eyes of adult society. Such expectations mean that children are often sentimentalized (e.g. James et al., 1998), and their intangible culture is popularly represented through works such as Opie and Opie (1959), who brought playground rhymes and games to wider attention.

While 'child' may be defined within biological or legal terms – as someone aged between infancy and puberty, a person bound to attend full-time education, or a legal minor, for instance – the associated 'childhood' cannot be physically set in the same way. In its simplest form, 'childhood' means nothing more than the state of being a child. But adults in modern Western society have a tendency to read more into the term, revering and romanticizing childhood, and often viewing it with a sense of nostalgia, as it incorporates our own fond memories of when we were children (James et al., 1998: 59). This image of a world of innocence, joy, imagination and fantastic freedom (Goldson, 1997: 1) creates a social obligation on children to be happy, often placing them in a metaphorical walled garden, a state where the child can experience freedom and pleasure, but is at the same time protected from the harsh reality of the outside world, preserving the child as innocent of adult worries.

However, not all children (both now and in the past) will have such an existence, which raises the issues of whether all children can automatically be said to have had a childhood and, if not, can such an individual still be called a 'child' (Cunningham, 1995: 1)? In his seminal text *L'Enfant et la vie familiale sous l'Ancien Régime* (1960), translated into English as *Centuries of Childhood* (1962), Ariès makes the famous statement that 'in medieval society, the idea of childhood did not exist' (p. 125). This was not to say that children were mistreated in the Middle Ages,

but simply that there was no concept of childhood that would be recognized by modern society in any way; what was missing was *sentiment de l'enfance*, 'awareness of the particular nature of childhood . . . which distinguishes the child from the adult' (p. 125). The fact that this opinion was subsequently criticized (for example, Kroll, 1977; Shahar, 1990), demonstrates the difficulty of pinning down what we mean by such a culturally loaded term as 'childhood'. It can therefore be seen that 'childhood' is a cultural construction and not a biologically determined period of life; its existence varies depending on country, social class, time and gender. However, Western society still persists in seeing childhood as being biologically defined and thus universal (Kamp, 2001: 3). Children's culture is appropriated by adults and turned into the commodity of 'childhood', a state in which the child's world becomes framed in an adult perspective. As such, childhood may be viewed as a controlled, institutionalized state imposed by the minds of older members of society on the young to help elders make sense of and cope with the next generation (Shepherd, 1994: 66). There is therefore no precise definition of 'child' or 'childhood'; the social significance of such terms changes depending on the context in which they are created and applied (Goldson, 1997: 2).

Children are a universal minority in all societies, with their experiences defined not only by their age and power relations with adults, but also by materiality (Sofaer Derevenski, 2000: 5). Cunningham (1995: 1) relates the diary narrative of an 11-year-old girl caught in the siege of Sarajevo, who describes her life without school, games and sweets; deprived of what we might recognize as the material manifestations of childhood, she questions whether she can really be a child, as a child can only be a child if he or she has a 'childhood'. There is no one universal child or childhood for any period or place, and as children cover such a great range of ages and abilities, so material culture varies considerably between younger and older children. Therefore, as children live their lives under a variety of conditions, 'different children in different circumstances may be associated with different material resources – producing . . . many competing versions of childhood' (James et al., 1998: 168). Children represent an interesting case in terms of material culture as, although much of the material world they interact with is made deliberately, purposefully and is reflective of the culture from which it originates, the objects we most commonly associate with this group were not made or controlled directly by its members, but rather are imposed on it by another group: adults. As Schlereth (1985) has stated: 'the artefacts of childhood are an especially problematical type of evidence' (p. 12).

In spite of being integrated within the adult society in which they live, children can be considered to have a culture and material culture of their own (Sofaer Derevenski, 2000). That is, there are objects made, modified, used by and associated with children, which allow individuals within

this group to be identified as a part of it through the ownership and use of them. Such artefacts become signifiers of children and childhood, and, if interpreted, should reveal aspects of the culture of this group; but these interpretations are subjective and are open to different perspectives. The main concern here is that there are many objects used widely by children that could be included in what we might consider to be the material culture of children and childhood, which are not identifiable as being different from adult material culture (such as some work implements) as children occupy the same material world as adults and much material culture is interchangeable, or has lost its association with children as a result of historical or cultural distance. For example, prior to its recent renovation, the National Trust Museum of Childhood in Sudbury, Derbyshire, exhibited general work implements and the products of industries such as lace-making and the potteries as a means of illustrating both the work children did and the fact that their material traces are often hard to distinguish from those of the adults that surround them (Roberts, 2006: 281–2). It could also be argued that some items considered to be integral to childhood are instead the material culture of parenthood: items that parents feel obliged to buy for their children that the child may not necessarily want or even need. In terms of more modern material culture, further confusion is created with the paradox of the constantly changing, or even disappearing, definition of childhood with young adults seeming ever more reluctant to grow up and take on responsibility, giving Western society the phenomenon of the 'kidult' (e.g. Postman, 1982; Scraton, 1997). As we grow more confused over the place of the child in our society, so it becomes harder to know whether material culture associated with children should belong to a growing or shrinking number of people.

The material culture most widely associated with children is the toy; indeed, Schlereth (1985) has stated that toys are usually the most common form of material culture representing children in museums (a point that will be tested later on in this article). Toys have a strong association with museum collections relating to children because they are the adult's favourite form of childhood material culture and are therefore collected more often. Toys appeal to adults for a number of reasons: the human delight in miniaturization, the 'cute' factor, the decorative art value of more expensive items, and the fact that they (as lost possessions) remind the collector of a childhood they themselves have grown out of. This is supported by research that found just 17 per cent of private toy collections are actively played with; instead such toys are mostly mementoes or art objects (Pearce, 1998: 56). This association between children and toys can also be seen reflected in a visitor survey conducted in the Bethnal Green Museum of Childhood, London, from 1984–5, when it was found that 91 per cent of the visitors questioned expected to see collections of toys and games on display before their first visit to the museum

(Gardiner and Burton, 1987: 163). Some 20 years after this survey, it has been found that curators estimate that 59 per cent of objects chosen to represent children and childhood on display in British museums are toys and games (Roberts, 2006: 203).

Of particular interest, but problematic, are the 'makeshift' toys of children's own devising. Makeshift toys are designed, made, named, remodelled, used and reused solely by children; they represent the creativity and imagination of children and the way in which almost anything can be adapted for their amusement or entertainment. Such items – also referred to under names such as folk toys, emergent toys, homemade toys, street toys, slum dolls, playthings, or simply as kids' toys (Schlereth, 1985; Herdman, 1998) – are generally made by children who do not have access to commercially manufactured toys. These objects may vary from being quite elaborately constructed items (such as the wonderful collection of such dolls amassed by Edward Lovett in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, most of which are now held by the Bethnal Green Museum of Childhood and the Edinburgh Museum of Childhood) to objects such as boxes that a child's imagination may adapt into a wide range of different entertainments. The Lovett dolls capture the adaptability of children, who fashioned toys from whatever was to hand: items as diverse as wooden spoons, discarded boots, clothes pegs, loofahs, rags and even bones. While some of the more elaborate dolls that Lovett collected may be easy enough for an adult to recognize as playthings, with many of the simpler items, perhaps adopted by a child for a short time or even only one game, identification (let alone collection or study) becomes difficult for those of us who have left such experiences behind. Equally, the fragility of these objects means that they rarely survive, and many collectors consider such items to be unworthy of serious consideration. However, they represent some of the few items of genuine children's material culture available to us. For the museum curator, this ephemeral quality has worked against such items finding their way into museum collections, although there are some interesting exceptions, such as the 200 street toys collected by Harborough Museum in 1988 (Mastoris, 1989). Unless a museum has made a specific effort to collect these artefacts – such as the Edith Cowan University Museum of Childhood in Australia, which collected sufficient amounts of these toys to mount an exhibition named *Homemade Treasures* (Shepherd, 2001: 8) – they will continue to be absent or few in number in museum collections.

An intriguing possibility arises with this difficulty in identifying objects associated with children, especially when they are from the distant past. There are many archaeological artefacts in museum collections of unknown function – often, such material becomes labelled as 'ritual'. However, miniature objects are sometimes labelled 'ritual' simply because they have no obvious use. Of course, not all ritual objects are miniatures

but this does raise the curious possibility that at least some of these unknown artefacts could be the material culture of past children, given that children often use objects proportional to their size. For example, two decorated miniature quernstones were found in Viking Age contexts at Lagore Crannog (Westmeath, Ireland) and were originally designated as ritual objects because their size eliminated them from being functional; it was only with later interpretation that the possibility of these objects being for children was considered (McAlister, 7 May 2005, personal communication). Another possible example is that of the carved stone balls found at Skara Brae Neolithic village (Orkney, Scotland) (MacGregor, 1999; Marshall, 1977).

The Skara Brae balls are just a small sample of over 400 such items, most of which originated in Scotland, but which remain some of the best documented. Roughly the size of cricket balls, the carved stones are decorated with incised lines, ridges, spikes and bosses, and date from the later Neolithic period (Marshall, 1977: 62). These strange objects have attracted considerable attention as curiosities, but there has been little available evidence to help determine the exact function of the balls. This is partly because of the lack of contextual information (only a small number have been found within properly excavated and recorded archaeological sites) and partly because many of the balls have become highly prized as collector's items in private collections. However, a number of suggestions have been made as to the function of the carved stone balls: weapons, bolas (throwing weapons), parts of a primitive weighing machine, oracles, symbols of the sun, or a means of mediating between the living and the gods (MacGregor, 1999: 263; Marshall, 1977: 63). Curiously, Evans (1957) proposed that the balls could have been used in a game between adult males (Marshall, 1977: 63), which is surprising given the usual rush to associate evidence of play with children. Recent sensory research into carved stone balls may support this suggestion, however. When the balls with spikes and bosses are spun, the motion makes them appear to have more points than they actually have or as a complete sphere, depending on the design of the ball. Therefore, if they were ever spun in the past, 'this would have resulted in a temporary transformation of the object into another form . . . and may have been considered magical' (MacGregor, 1999: 267). Given their size and properties, is it not at least possible that the Skara Brae stone balls could have been used as toys to amuse children? This suggestion implies that there could well be a whole range of objects connected with children's culture in museums, not just dolls and teddy bears, but recognizing them as such is only possible if archaeologists, historians, collectors and curators are prepared to move beyond adult-centred interpretations of objects.

This article argues for the need to not only make the category of children more visible in material culture studies, but also to consider

some of the material impact of children in our society by examining the repositories of material culture held in museum collections. Little consideration has been given to the material culture of children and childhood in the literature, and it remains a sparsely populated field of work. There have been texts written on childhood objects themselves, particularly histories and collector's guides (e.g. Jackson, 1992; Schoonmaker, 1981) but these have mostly been limited to toys, dolls and costume. Few works have gone further to consider the relationship between these objects and children as a serious area of study. In archaeology, an area that might be expected to take an interest in investigating the material traces of children, they have been much neglected, perhaps because, in the more distant past in particular, children are perceived as intangible (Kamp, 2001). While the archaeology of children is currently going through a period of high interest (Egan, 2000: 38), up until relatively recently it was considered that 'the child's world has been left out of archaeological research' (Lillehammer, 1989: 89). Museum collections are a fundamental resource for material evidence (Pearce, 1994: 15) and, despite the idiosyncrasy of their assemblage, present a unique and intriguing opportunity for examining objects related to children and childhood.

#### **UNDERSTANDING CHILDHOOD OBJECTS IN THE MUSEUM CONTEXT**

Schlereth (1985) made a number of important comments about the composition of museum collections of childhood material culture. He stated that toys usually form the largest category of such material culture collected by museums, with costume often being the second largest category, and that it would be expected that there would be 'far fewer male costumes than female ones' (p. 3). He also suggested that children were represented by little more than toys and costume, and that there was a tendency to collect mass-produced and decorative toys rather than homemade playthings. Similar comments have been expressed elsewhere (Gardiner and Burton, 1987; Mastoris, 1989). However, nowhere was evidence given to support or quantify the assumptions. This study therefore presented a good opportunity to test whether or not these past observations in the key literature were indeed accurate.

A comprehensive survey of all museum collections was beyond the scope of this study, so the methodology took in both a broad perspective of museum collections via a survey of curators working in accredited British museums, and a more detailed examination with four data sets of individual museum collections. These data sets were not case studies but were intended as examples, which helped to examine the observations made in the literature, and also gave some insight into the collection of children's material culture in these museums. Four large museum

collections were selected for these data sets: Tyne & Wear Museums (Newcastle upon Tyne), the Gallery of English Costume (Manchester), Nottingham City Museums and the Museum of London, totalling 6,611 relevant records. It was desirable to study one dedicated costume collection because more assumptions have been made about costume than any other type of material culture, and the Gallery of English Costume has a very large social history (rather than fashion) collection of children's clothing (Tozer, 1985: 20). In contrast, it was not felt necessary to study a toy collection as the only observation made was that homemade toys would be expected to be fewer in number than manufactured toys.

## METHOD

The questionnaire was sent to the 325 curators in accredited British museums listed in the *Museums Yearbook*; this list had first been piloted via the 'Museum-L'<sup>1</sup> and 'Child-Mus'<sup>2</sup> mailing lists (received by a large number of museum professionals internationally). Respondents were asked to select, from the list provided, which 15 different categories of material culture held by their museum were specifically related to children (defined here as people aged under 16, including babies and infants). These material culture categories sorted the vast array of potential objects into a more manageable number of groups, A to O, which was intended to make both response and analysis easier; for reasons of comparison, this tool was also used in the data sets. Unfortunately, there is no universal museum object classification index for the UK on which to base these categories, but the Social History and Industrial Classification system or SHIC (SHIC Working Party, 1993) is more widely used in British museums than any other classification, name list or thesaurus (Stiff and Holm, 2001), and was therefore a suitable basis for guiding the formation of these material culture categories. The categories developed were:

- (A) Toys and games (manufactured)
- (B) Toys and games (made by children/at home, i.e. 'makeshift toys')
- (C) Clothing and shoes
- (D) Sports equipment
- (E) Books (including comics, children's newspapers and magazines)
- (F) Baby items
- (G) School and education items
- (H) Punishment and discipline items
- (I) Tools and work items
- (J) Health and medical items
- (K) Religious items
- (L) Photographs
- (M) Documents

- (N) Other domestic items (such as children's chairs and samplers)  
 (O) Other (items that do not readily fit into the above categories)

The survey was issued via email (where available) and post, with those curators who had not responded to the initial mailing within two months being sent a second copy to improve return rates. A total of 240 surveys were returned, giving a response rate of 74 per cent. According to Mangione (1995: 60–1), this equates to a 'very good' response rate (where over 85% is 'excellent', 60% to 70% is 'acceptable', 50% to 60% is 'barely acceptable' and below 50% is 'not scientifically acceptable').

## RESULTS

Turning first to the survey results to get a broad picture of the content of museum collections, the data give a picture of the distribution of types of objects. Respondents were asked whether their museum held any objects relating to children or childhood and, if so, which of the material culture categories it belonged to. This question was broken down into an initial yes/no division; a positive response led to the list of categories for the respondent to select from in the following question. In response to the first part of the question, the answers returned are shown in Table 1.

The second part of the question was intended to assess the types of material culture held by the museums; this question applied only to those answering 'yes' to the initial part, therefore the numbers in Table 2 and Figure 1 are out of 227 rather than the total 240 surveys. Respondents could select as many categories as appropriate, therefore the percentage columns do not add up to 100 per cent.

From these data it can be seen that the majority of curators (95%) agreed that their museum held something in the collections relating to children/childhood. Even allowing for errors on behalf of the curators, this response implies that museum items relating to children are in fact very widespread. Within those museums that did hold children's material culture, it can be seen that the largest group was manufactured toys and

TABLE 1 Does your museum hold any artefact(s) specifically related to or associated with the activities of children in the past or present?

<i>Response</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>%</i>
Yes	227	95
No	13	5
No Answer Given	0	0
Total	240	100

TABLE 2 The categories any collected material falls into, according to survey respondents ( $N = 227$ )

Category	Yes (frequency)	Yes (%)	No (frequency)	No (%)
A Toys & games	199	88	28	12
B Makeshift toys	102	45	125	55
C Clothing & shoes	195	86	32	14
D Sports equipment	89	39	138	61
E Books & comics	157	69	70	31
F Baby items	168	74	59	26
G Education	192	85	35	15
H Discipline	74	33	153	67
I Work items	69	30	158	70
J Health & medical	84	37	143	63
K Religion	90	40	137	60
L Photographs	169	74	58	26
M Documents	105	46	122	54
N Other domestic	60	26	167	74
O Other	22	10	205	90

games (selected by 88% of respondents), closely followed by clothing (86%). Other popular categories were education (85%), baby items (74%), photographs (74%) and books (69%). However, relatively few respondents reported having items relating to work (30%), discipline (33%) or domestic items (26%). (It should be noted that objects listed in the 'other' category by respondents included hobby items, school medals,

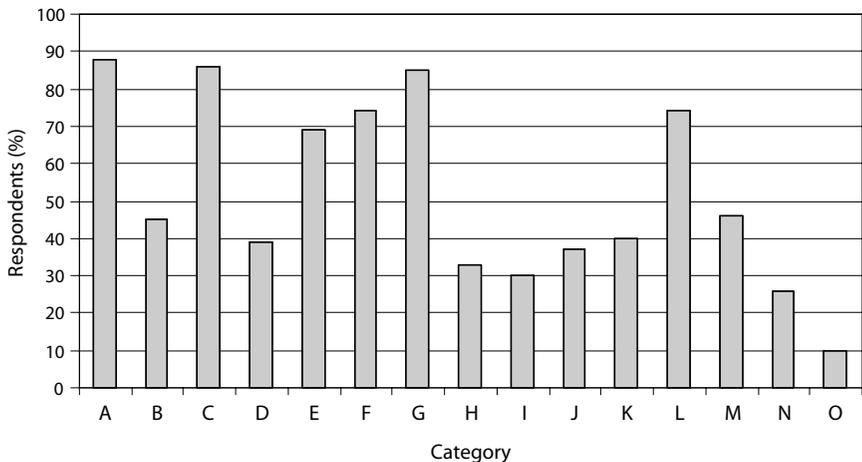


FIGURE 1 Graph showing positive responses to the survey question ( $N = 227$ ).

oral history recordings about childhood, amulets for children, a child's musical instrument and a Roman tile containing a baby footprint.)

These data follow closely what would be expected based on the literature discussed earlier, with toys and clothing the largest two categories of material culture, although there is clearly much more to museum collections than these two major categories of items. It might also be anticipated that museum collections would hold those items reminiscent of a positive childhood: playing, reading books and the miniature material culture of babies, rather than those of working or being disciplined. This is what Fleming (1989) termed 'a Tinkerbell version of childhood, which is pleasing to the eye and imagination' (p. 32). However, it is curious to note that much of the published work on the matter of collecting around the theme of children in museums seems to miss out schooling and education – despite the fact that it is a common area of material culture within museums, as this survey shows. It is also interesting to note that only just over a third (37%) of curators stated that their museum held items relating to children's health, yet advances in healthcare over time would surely have had far more impact on the lives of children than any toy.

Moving on to the data sets, Table 3 presents the frequencies of objects and their relative percentage proportions for all four data sets combined, while Figure 2 illustrates this distribution.

By examining the figures in Table 3, it can be seen that toys were not the largest category of material culture collected: they represented

TABLE 3 Distribution of objects by material culture category

<i>Category</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>%</i>
A Toys & games	524	8
B Makeshift toys	42	1
C Clothing & shoes	3064	46
D Sports equipment	3	0
E Books & comics	574	9
F Baby items	1229	18
G Education	25	1
H Discipline	0	0
I Work items	0	0
J Health & medical	11	0
K Religion	1	0
L Photographs	748	11
M Documents	23	1
N Other domestic	98	1
O Other	269	4
Total	6611	100

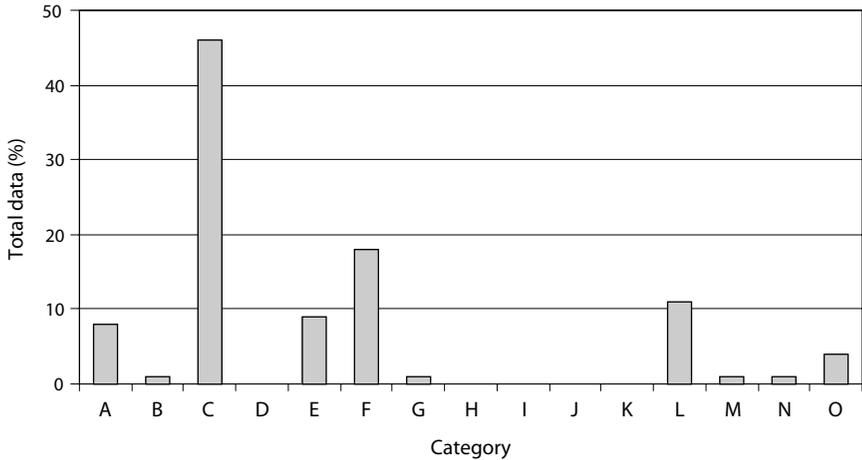


FIGURE 2 Graph showing distribution of objects by material culture category in the data sets.

just 9 per cent of objects overall. However, the fact that one of the collections included in this study was from a specialist costume museum (the Gallery of English Costume) would have produced a disproportionately high number of objects in category C. If this is taken into account and the 1,580 items produced by the Gallery of English Costume are removed, this still leaves 1,484 items in this category: nearly three times as many clothing objects as there were toys. Therefore, when considered overall, toys were only the fifth most numerous type of material culture. If these figures are considered using the chi-squared test, it can be seen that at the 95 per cent confidence level, there is no significant difference between the number of toys and the next largest category of material culture (books) but there is a significant difference between the number of toys and the largest category – clothing – demonstrating that toys are far from being the largest category of material culture in the data overall.

This distribution also illustrates the great disparity in museum collections between manufactured and homemade toys. Of the 42 homemade toys found, 40 of these were dolls from the Museum of London, undoubtedly the influence of the Lovett Collection on the data. This was perhaps to be expected, given the lack of attention that curators and collectors of toys have given to playthings made by children themselves (Mastoris, 1989: 22; Schlereth, 1985: 2). It is interesting to note that both examples from the Tyne & Wear Museums data came from anthropology rather than social history collections. Therefore, whilst being homemade toys, they do not represent a Western society where they were made in opposition to mass produced toys: such local 'street toys' (Mastoris, 1989: 22) are missing altogether from this data set.

Moving on to the comments made about children's costume collections, it has long been noted that adult costume collections usually have a tendency to be biased towards women's clothes as a result of 'the frilly and feminine associations of costume' (Rose, 1989: 19). Women's clothing is often more elaborate, has historically changed more quickly than men's fashions and arguably has greater aesthetic value. Passive collecting by museums may have been partially responsible for the dominance of female clothing in costume collections, as museums tend to be offered what the public think is wanted, based on what has already been seen on display, leading to a self-perpetuating cycle of dress collections growing at the expense of other areas (Clark, 1993: 230). In this sense then, such passive collecting is a regulatory process in the development of collections.

To test for this evidential bias in children's clothing collections, the data from all four collections could be used, as the Tyne & Wear Museums and Nottingham City Museums examples contained a large proportion of costume items. The Museum of London data set also contained many category C items, although it should be noted that a considerable quantity of these items were archaeological leathers (shoes/boots/sandals) that obviously could not be attributed a gender classification due to their incomplete survival and/or lack of knowledge. This unfortunately left a much higher proportion of material with unknown gender than in the other three examples. This analysis was still carried out on the London data, although it should have less emphasis placed on it than the other data sets due to this considerable unknown factor. Each item was attributed with a gender where possible; this attribute was given where either the museum recorded an item as being related to a male or female, or where it could be reasonably presumed (e.g. a spencer would only be worn by a girl, whilst a Boy Scout uniform would have been worn by a boy). It can therefore be seen (Table 4 and Figure 3) that in all of these examples, girl's clothing makes up a greater proportion of category C items than boy's clothing; indeed, when examined overall, it can be seen that 49 per cent of all recorded clothing items had a female association in contrast to just 23 per cent with a male association – so the assumption outlined earlier appears to be valid.

The assumptions and observations made by past authors about the composition of collections of children's material culture were taken as a starting point for much of this work. Based on the literature, it would be expected that manufactured toys would be the most prominent category of children's material culture, with clothing second. The survey results indicated that toys and clothing were indeed the most widespread categories reported, with 88 per cent and 86 per cent, respectively, of respondents selecting them (see Figure 1). High levels of these items and low levels of 'negative' material culture (e.g. work and discipline items) may

TABLE 4 Clothing and shoes sorted by gender association

<i>Gender association</i>	<i>Total frequency</i>	<i>Total (%)</i>
Male	693	23
Female	1506	49
Neither/unknown	865	28
Total	3064	100

be linked to passive collecting reiterating the objects a museum already has. This would seem to suggest that the assumptions about composition were indeed correct. However, this was balanced out by the data sets, where it can be seen that this pattern does not hold true for the collections examined in depth. Therefore, while toys and clothing were widespread items in collections, this does not automatically make them the most numerous in individual ones. With regard to makeshift toys, the survey revealed a surprisingly high number of responses indicating the presence of these items (45%), especially when the low levels seen in the data sets are taken into account. This may indicate that such items are collected more often than suspected, possibly through the actions of individual collectors, such as Edward Lovett. Manufactured toys were seen to be both more widespread amongst collections and more numerous in the ones studied in depth than makeshift toys; therefore, this particular assumption was correct. In the case of children's costume collections, it would seem that more girls than boys were represented by costume, reflecting the situation commonly seen in adult costume collections and, in this case, the assumptions made by previous authors were accepted. The idea that such collections should contain little other than toys and clothing was most certainly incorrect; these data illustrate the wide

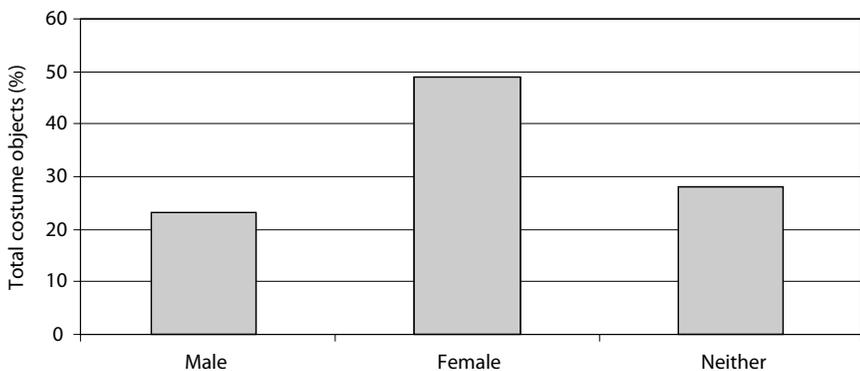


FIGURE 3 Graph showing gender association of children's costume.

variety and large amounts of other material culture held by museums. Therefore, some of the assumptions appear to be correct, while others were incorrect.

As a final point, it is possible to draw on the earlier comment made about objects from the distant past possibly being connected with children if they were to be reinterpreted. In the process of data collection, a small number of objects that were archaeological were found in the museum collections that could have been linked to children – 146 in total across the four data sets, ranging from Roman, through Medieval and post-Medieval items. While this represents only a small number of items when seen on the scale of these data sets, it does suggest that there may be objects kept by museums that could be related to children if their interpretation were to be re-considered.

## CONCLUSION

The material culture of children and childhood stands out as being an area that would benefit from further research. While work continues to be done on such material culture, much of this is either in archaeology or material culture studies, which often consider objects in an abstract and isolated manner. In the future, more work needs to be undertaken to develop this area in museums: how such objects relate to children and childhood, how they are collected and how they are utilized in displays. Jordanova (1989: 27) states that more work is also needed to fully understand how objects are invested with significance about the rich and contradictory meanings of childhood to illuminate the link between knowledge and the museum experience by helping us to answer questions such as: How could we see childhood in these objects? By what mechanisms could they evoke memories? While it is reasonable to assume that visitors do see something in childhood objects that goes beyond the mere physical form, it is simply not valid to assume that this is the same for all people, regardless of age, class, culture or gender. At present, we still do not fully understand how this something more is perceived in objects and how it varies according to audience; this is certainly an area where future research would be welcomed.

The study of material culture is founded on the principle that artefacts have resulted from deliberate human behaviour and cultural contexts, making them socially meaningful. However, in the context of the data, such principles seem difficult to apply; most material culture that children use or modify was originally made by adults, often with the specific intent of manufacturing an object for a child. Therefore, when the principles of interpretation are applied to most museum objects relating to children, what is accessed is not the child's world, but the adult's perception of what the child needs or wants. Such toys and child-specific artefacts represent

attempts by adults to suggest and enforce certain norms of behaviour for children based on their age, gender and socio-economic status (Wilkie, 2000: 101). Such objects reveal adult (especially parental) perspectives of the child, and not whether the child enjoyed playing with them or how exactly they were used. They reflect 'the imperial practices of adults' (Baxter, 2005: 41) rather than the native practices of children.

To a child, toys (and certain other objects of desire) can be something more than or different from the original adult design. For instance, they can represent important elements in peer social relations and can confer popularity and social status on the owner, as discussed by Evans (2006: 119–38) in relation to a collection of Pokemon trading cards and stickers. This study highlights that children are capable of using toys in different and more complex ways than perhaps adults intended, and that they are therefore more than just vehicles for facilitating play. Ellen Seiter agrees with this, commenting that 'we know that children make meaning out of toys that are unanticipated by – perhaps indecipherable to – their adult designers' (Cook, 2004: 5). Sutton-Smith (1986) has also noted that:

Any readings in the history of play will quickly show that there is little mention of toys, either in earlier historical times or in cross-cultural studies . . . the predominant nature of play throughout history has been play with others, not play with toys. (p. 26)

This raises an interesting question about the adult association of toys with children. Even when toys were used by children: 'it is simply not possible to know what toys mean to children, especially in the past' (Jordanova, 1989: 27). Therefore, manufactured toys do not – indeed, cannot – evoke 'childhood' as many museum displays suggest. Childhood is an abstraction, a concept of such generality that it would be difficult for any object to embody it; childhood is a set of experiences rather than a universal state, and it is hard to envision it physically being manifested in culturally and historically vague museum displays of toys.

With regard to understanding such material culture, this problem may impact on some interpretation methodologies, which may not be as appropriate as in other areas of material culture studies. For example, interpreting many objects related to children semiotically or through their social meanings is likely to produce results where the adult consciousness acts as a filter: we see the adult intentions more than or in conjunction with the child's use, partly because we ourselves are observing from an adult perspective. This does not mean that conventional models of interpreting material culture should be rejected in this context, but it is a factor that should be taken into account. For example, in some museum displays about childhood, dolls are exhibited that were never intended as toys for children (such as Ancient Egyptian shabti dolls at the Edinburgh Museum of Childhood, and French fashion dolls in the childhood section

of Judges' Lodgings Museum, Lancaster). These items were exhibited because they had been read and understood at surface level: doll equals children. However, once the idea of the filter of adulthood is taken into account, it can be appreciated that these items have deeper meanings that are not associated with children or childhood.

Throughout this study, the terms 'material culture of children' and 'material culture of childhood' have been used interchangeably, which is the approach used in most of the relevant literature. However, in the light of this research, it is suggested that these could be two distinct and different terms. It has been noted already in this article that 'children' and 'childhood' are distinguishable (Lillehammer, 2000: 20); therefore, when applied to material culture, 'the material culture of children' and 'the material culture of childhood' should perhaps also be differentiated. The 'material culture of children' should be applied to those items that children make themselves or adapt into their own culture from the adult world that have a different use to that intended by the adult manufacturer. The 'material culture of childhood', on the other hand, should refer only to those items made for children by adults, as such objects reflect adult attitudes towards children and not the child's world in itself. However, these very specific definitions cannot easily be applied within a museum context due to the unknown provenance and uncertain histories of many items, and the difficulties of understanding the child's use and modification of objects. It is suggested, however, that this distinction is maintained theoretically in future work in this field wherever possible.

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### Notes

1. <http://home.ease.lsoft.com/archives/museum-l.html>
2. <https://mailman.rice.edu/mailman/listinfo/childmus>

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