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toys are us

Santa and his friends stand tall in the world's first purpose-built museum for toys

TEXT JULIANA FOO PHOTOGRAPHY DAN ONG, D6 STUDIO GALLERY

BEHIND THE GLASS DOORS of MINT (Moment of Imagination and Nostalgia with Toys) Museum, an extensive collection of vintage Christmas toys from as far back as the 1940s are showcased amongst Tintin and Mickey Mouse. This personal collection of museum owner Mr Chang Y. F., amassed over 25 years, are amongst 50,000 pieces of vintage toys and childhood memorabilia from the mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth century exhibited at MINT. We visited the museum and spoke to curator Richard Tan to bring you this Christmas story.

Is MINT all about toys?

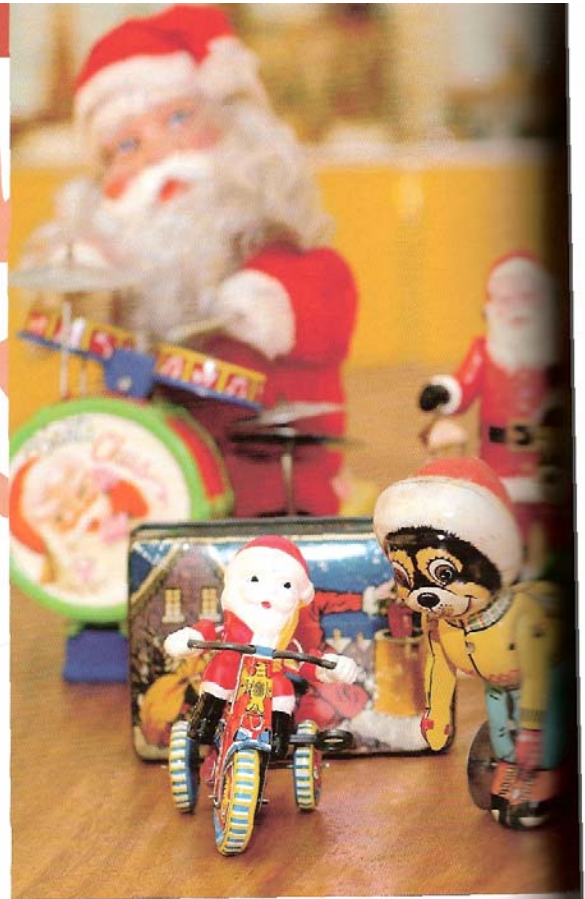
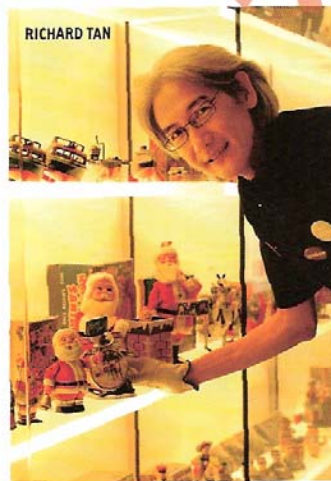
It is about evoking childhood memories; that moment when you recognise a familiar character or find a forgotten

Christmas toys of the '60s had more rounded features, fabric and movements. The '70s toys were solid and made of plastic...

toy. It is also about rediscovery. The purpose of the museum is about the toys and not the owner. We want to pass down to future generations the history of vintage toys and put Singapore on the map with a world-class toy museum.

Tell us the story behind the Christmas collection.

It adds to the Christmas mood and with Santa, we would like to spread the Christmas spirit with cheer and laughter. There are Santas made from celluloid from the '40s, tin ones from the '50s, battery operated ones from the '60s, and Santas made of plastic from the '70s. You can see from the material and colour when it dates back to. They age naturally and you cannot reproduce another one like it so it is very rare. From red, it becomes orange and blue turns to turquoise. Every piece is unique. The collection comes from Japan, Hong Kong, China, Germany, England and the US.



How do you differentiate one Santa from the next?

We have a tin Santa from the 1950s and it has a long coat — sort of a priest-like dressing. During that time, the Santas were thinner. The British liked to use pastel colours while the Japanese — who are great toy makers — painted more vibrant colours and happy faces. Celluloid was commonly used. It is a more translucent material, and the faces were handpainted. Celluloid was banned in the '50s as it was found to be highly flammable and was replaced by plastic and vinyl.

Christmas toys of the '60s had more rounded features, fabric and movements. The '70s toys were solid and made of plastic, and we also have a fabric Santa doll from Hong Kong that was made using the mould of a doll's face.

Which is your favourite Santa?

I like the tandem animal skaters made in the 1950s. The Japanese wind-up tin-plate toy has all three skaters synchronised with one leg kicking and heads turning. It represented the Western culture of going to the pond to skate during Christmas.





An assortment of vintage toys



Santa Squeaky c.1970



Sking boy c.1960

What sort of impact did technology have on the development of toys?

With improvement in technology after World War II, including the development of micromotors, it was possible to make toys more elaborate by introducing more actions to the toys. Plastics also became more widely used. For example, we have a plastic Santa ramp walker made in the 1960s by Louis Marx. The toy walks down an incline under gravity rather than using battery. What is special about this toy is that it still retains its original sealed packaging. It is completely intact and has its original label.

"I want to reach out to the child in every one of us. A visit to the museum is like a nostalgic journey of re-discovery, giving visitors an emotional link to their childhood which has often been long forgotten" — Mr Chang

An array of antique Santa toys

FAR LEFT Happy Santa playing drums c.1960

LEFT Celluloid boy on bob-sled c.1940



Are today's toys collectables?

No, the new toys are mass-produced and what was made in the 1980s are still available today so it is not the same as vintage or antique toys, which are more than 100 years old.

How do you keep the toys in mint condition?

The toys are usually handled with gloves to avoid any moisture settling on them. The more fragile pieces, when stored, are wrapped in bubble wrap and packed with packing peanuts for protection. For tin-plate toys, as long as they do not come in contact with water and are handled carefully, they ought to last a long time. **hc**

Learn more about toys at Compasspoint Mall from 5 – 17 December. About 30 toys, including ones related to Christmas, will be on exhibit. MINT Museum is at 26 Seah Street. Website: www.emint.com