

Contemporary Collectibles: Collectors in tune with Silly Symphonies

by Linda_Rosenkrantz

In the ancient land of Disney, before full-length features like "Snow White" and "Pinocchio" were even a gleam in Walt Disney's eyes, there were the wildly popular short cartoons. First came the Mickey-and-the-gang shorts, initiated in 1928 with "Steamboat Willie," followed, a little more than a year later by the very different series known as Silly Symphonies.

The concept came about largely because Disney's first musical director, Carl Stalling - who went back to Walt's early days in Kansas City - was a staunch proponent of music's key role in animation and convinced Disney to do a series of comedy shorts in which music would be the driving force. The first to be produced was "The Skeleton Dance," in which ingenious animation by Ub Iwerks (the first person to draw Mickey Mouse) was matched with a clever score by Stalling, orchestrating the spectacle of skeletons coming to life in a spooky graveyard. An instant hit, "The Skeleton Dance" played for weeks in New York, at a time when cartoons generally changed every few days. Then followed a series of evocative mood pieces, such as "Springtime" and "Night."

Prior to 1932, all Disney cartoons were made in black and white; in that year, the studio obtained exclusive rights to use Technicolor's new three-strip color process for animation for the next three years. From then on, starting with "Flowers and Trees," which won the first Oscar ever awarded for animation, all Silly Symphonies were made in color, reaching an impressive standard of excellence, with old nursery rhymes and original concepts bursting into vibrant, animated life, gaining a virtual monopoly on the genre.

Academy Awards were awarded year after year for such films as "The Three Little Pigs" (a gigantic hit, seen as a parable for the public fighting the Great Depression) and "The Tortoise and the Hare." And not only did the staff hone their skills in preparation for the first feature, but such enduring characters as Donald Duck were introduced, and Pluto was given his first starring role.

Animation art, especially production setups, from the early black-and-white Symphonies is quite rare. It is still possible to occasionally find set-ups from such color films as "The Three Little Pigs," "The Grasshopper and the Ant" and "The Night Before Christmas," but at astronomical prices. Among the other kinds of material available are Three Little Pigs and Big Bad Wolf bowls by Salem China, Three Little Pigs ceramic ashtrays, soap sets, drums, sand pails, banks, many books, a boxed set of Silly Symphony bells by Noma, and several board games, including a "Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf" example.

In addition, Dell Comics produced a series of Silly Symphony comic books in the 1950s, which can be found on today's market.

RELEVANT REFERENCES:

"Walt Disney's Silly Symphonies: A Companion to the Classic Cartoon Series" by Russell Merritt and J.B. Kaufman (La Cineteca del Fruiti).

An all-you-need-to-know book on this subject, with a substantive history of the series combined with a short-by-short extended listing, from the primitive 1929 black-and-white "The Skeleton Dance" to the more fully developed, full-color 1938 "Ferdinand the Bull," providing such specifics for each as which animators did what, and other creative contributors, source and synopsis, length, negative cost, opening date, awards, reissues, TV showings, video and DVD releases.

A more general guide is "Collecting Disneyana" by David Longest (Collector Books). Basically an illustrated price guide, it spans a wide chronological range, giving most of its attention to early Mickey and Minnie Disneyana related to the cartoon shorts (including the Silly Symphonies, which for some reason are in the features section) and feature films, but also covers TV memorabilia and more recent Disney collectibles. There is also a useful collector's guide touching on issues of preservation and restoration, storage and display.

Linda Rosenkrantz has edited Auction magazine and authored 15 books, including "The Baby Name Bible" (St. Martin's Press; www.babynamebible.com). She cannot answer letters personally.

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