Contemporary Collectibles: Cleaning up with toys

by Linda_Rosenkrantz

When my daughter Chloe was still barely toddling, one thing she loved to do was sweep. Someone had given her a little red-handled mini-broom and she liked nothing better than to industriously sweep the floor. And just recently I ran into a little boy who was infatuated with his mother's hand vacuum. There's a long tradition of kids playing with housekeeping toys - not only cleaning and washing, but cooking, baking, serving, and storing and, even if they might be not as popular with children in today's less gender-defined world, vintage examples have a strong sentimental appeal to collectors.

Brooms existed in this country from the time American Indians showed the early settlers how to make sturdy brooms from birch sapling branches, sometimes using wild grasses for sweeping. In 1876, the carpet sweeper was invented by Anna and Melville Bissell, and by 1890 it had somewhat superseded the humble broom. Miniature examples of both, sold singly and in quite elaborate sets, were popular with little Miss Homemakers who liked to emulate their stay-at-home moms.

Amsco, for example, produced in 1953 an all-inclusive, boxed Doll-E Housekeeper set containing not only a pail, broom, carpet sweeper, mop, dustpan, brushes, name-brand Ajax, Brillo, Vel and DuPont sponge, but also an actual Gold Seal Congoleum rug to clean. Other handy cleaning appliances included a well-made heavy, metal Bissell carpet sweeper that could actually be emptied, and other carpet sweepers decorated with Cinderella (how appropriate!), and other little girls. Disney did a couple of early Mickey Mouse sweepers, one with Mickey at the piano and Minnie singing, and another, from the 1930s, now valued at $400.

The Kiddie Brush & Toy Co. of Jonesville, Mich., came out with a line of chore toys under the brand name Susy Goose, which were popular from the mid-1930s to the late 1960s. Founded in 1930, the company also produced a number of pre-Goose toys, including a carpet sweeper featuring a mother pig wearing an apron with a puppy looking on. But soon the white-haired grandmotherly goose figure of Susy, drawn by "Peter Maybe" - actually the pseudonym of a woman artist - had taken over, sometimes accompanied by the rhyme "With my sweeper, work is fun, I'm a comin' on the run!" The Susy Goose Musical Tone Sweeper showed a duck backing into a large harp, making a not very musical plinking sound.

Another firm, Wolverine, marketed more sophisticated cleaning sets in the 1950s, with blue and white Delft-like decoration depicting children in Dutch costume in windmill-studded landscape, and including a step-on garbage can complete with inner container. Selling for $2.98 new in 1953, the Wolverine set is now valued in the $125-$175 range.

In addition to all these dusting and cleaning items, there is a wide selection of washday paraphernalia as well - from washboards and wringers to irons and ironing boards - the subject for another column.

A small but valuable resource in this field is the new "Collector's Guide to Housekeeping Toys, 1870-1970,

from Metal to Plastic" by Margaret Wright (Collector Books, $17). The content is divided into chapters such as "Baking Day," "Cleaning Day," "Washing Day," "Kitchenware," "Stoves," etc. There is a color illustration of each item, an extended, informative description and a market price range. A few examples:

- 14-piece Doll-E Housekeeper set, including pail, broom, sweeper, apron, dust mop and various name-brand products, 1953, $175-$225.

- Muslin drawstring clothespin bag, illustrated with a little girl and stenciled "Dolly's Clothes Pin Bag" with 12 original clothespins $25-$40.

- Bissell "Little Queen carpet sweeper, 1957, $45-$65.

- Wooden tub, washboard and wringer $65-$95.

- Musical tone sweeper by Kiddie Brush featuring Susy Goose sweeping the carpet $55-$75.

- Five-piece Wolverine cleaning set, circa 1953, with blue and white Dutch decoration $125-$175.

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