

Contemporary Collectibles: Crayola colors collectors' world

by Linda_Rosenkrantz

It's hard to imagine a world not colored by crayons - and Crayola crayons at that. What would we put on our fridge doors if not our preschoolers' crayon scribbles? Pencil or pen just wouldn't do it. And coloring books, where we learned to stay within the lines - would they even exist? And what would restaurants offer kids to keep them occupied while waiting for their food?

Yet before 1903 that's how the world was. That was the year a pair of upstate New York cousins named Edwin Binney and C. Howard Smith introduced their first box of eight Crayolas, which sold for a nickel.

Binney was the son of Joseph W. Binney, whose Peekskill Chemical Co. produced various chemical and paint products, including lampblack, charcoal, and the famous red iron oxide paint used for barns. Around 1885, Edwin and cousin Howard took over the company, renaming it Binney & Smith and adding shoe polish, printing ink and schoolroom slate pencils to the line.

When teachers complained that the chalks available were too crumbly and dusty and imported crayons too costly, they developed first a "dustless" chalk and then better-quality, nontoxic crayons, which they christened Crayolas, a name coined by Binney's schoolteacher wife Alice, combining the French "craie" (meaning a stick of color) and "ola" (from oleaginous, referring to the oily paraffin wax in the crayons). Though far from being the earliest crayons made, they were the first intended for children.

The changing colors of the crayons in the box make an interesting study, reflecting social as well as aesthetic changes. The eight basic colors introduced in 1903 - red, blue, green, yellow, orange, brown, violet and black - remained the status quo for many years until the startling number of 40 new colors was introduced in 1948, including white, gold and silver, bittersweet, carnation pink, cornflower, mahogany, melon, olive green, periwinkle, salmon, thistle, Prussian blue (changed to "midnight blue" in 1958 in response to teachers' requests) and flesh, changed to "peach" in 1962, partially as result of the civil rights movement. Similarly, Indian red was changed to chestnut in 1999.

Fluorescent colors were added in 1972. In 1990 they were renamed to reflect their pizzazz with such labels as Atomic Tangerine, Blizzard Blue, Laser Lemon, Radical Red and Neon Carrot. Things went even further when the firm allowed consumers to become namers, coming up with such oddities as Macaroni and Cheese, Banana Mania, Fuzzy Wuzzy Brown, Piggy Pink and Inch Worm. In recent years the brand has expanded to include crayons that sparkle, glow in the dark and smell like flowers.

In terms of collectibles, the obvious but elusive prize would be a very early box of the original eight Crayola Gold Medal crayons, with the contents in pristine shape.

Over the years, Crayola has lent its name to a variety of other products, including a Crayola-themed Lionel electric activity train consisting of boxcar, gondola, caboose and a diesel switcher with operating headlights, with curved and straight track sections; a 1948 nursery rhyme cut-out book; a hard, red and white plastic desk lamp; large blue and pink plush Crayola bears; numerous paint, coloring and drawing sets; an Avon Crayola-like box containing three lip glosses in the shape of crayons; a series of Hallmark Christmas ornaments, starting with the 1989 teddy bear sitting on a raft made of crayons; and a coin bank in the form of a 1912 Ford Crayola delivery truck.

If you have any doubts about Crayola's icon status, here are two points of evidence: an open 1903 box showing the eight crayons was the subject of a 32-cent postage stamp, and in 1998 a 1958 Crayola 64 box became part of the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History.

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