

Schoenhut's Circus: A Step into the Imagination  
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In the second half of the nineteenth century, American-made dolls were becoming increasingly popular. Albert Schoenhut, a German immigrant, founded his toy company in 1872, and became recognized for his production of educational, durable, and realistic toys. The most well known of all his creations are his all-wood dolls and circus sets. This essay will describe the historical context of Albert Schoenhut and the eight figurines of the Humpty Dumpty Circus that the Decorative Arts Museum contains, ultimately illustrating the influence of one of the earliest and predominant toy makers in American history.

Satisfying the imagination, restlessness, and playfulness of children has been the role of many objects throughout the centuries. For every young girl and boy, toys to play with seem an absolutely essential part of life. In an attempt to please a growing consumerist market, American toy manufacturers began popping up in the late nineteenth century. Thus, American-made dolls began to grow more and more popular and prevalent in American homes.

Despite the American manufacturers' attempt to generate quality products, it was Germany who was known for its ability to produce desired toys. For years the German toy makers had monopolized the market, but the Schoenhut Humpty Dumpty Circus became one of the few American toy products to be exported in significant numbers. Due to the success of toy-makers such as Albert Schoenhut, a fresh and exciting line of life-like toys was being produced on American soil. But how did this man appear on the scene? What made his products— especially the Humpty Dumpty Circus—stand out in a predominately German market?

One aspect to consider in relation to Schoenhut's success is the context in which he was raised, specifically his family history. Albert Schoenhut (1848-1912) was born in Wurtemberg, Germany

to a toy-making family. Both his father and grandfather made wooden dolls, rocking horses, and wagons.<sup>1</sup> From a very young age, Albert was immersed in the toy-making business and was surrounded by the abilities and craftsmanship of great German producers. Albert began making toys with astonishing expertise in his home, which eventually led to his immigration to America. “In 1866, John Dahl, a buyer for Wanamaker’s department store, heard of young Albert's talent and brought the 17-year old to Philadelphia.” After working in this city for a time, he eventually struck out on his own in 1872, founding the Schoenhut Piano Company. When his business continued to increase in popularity and income, he started manufacturing other toys, dolls, and his famous circus figurines.<sup>2</sup>

Although his background played a crucial role in his toy making, perhaps the biggest key to Albert’s success was the brilliance and cultural recognition behind his most popular toys. In the days when there were fewer choices of entertainment, the American public eagerly anticipated the arrival of the circus; Schoenhut evoked these feelings and transferred some of this circus magic into his Humpty Dumpty Circus, first produced in the 1900s. The original sets included 20 figures made with joints and slotted hands and feet so that they could be made to stand, kneel, or sit. These wooden toys were painted with true-life colors and were made to appear realistic by using actual hair for features such as tails or manes. The boxed sets were enlarged in 1913 to include 33 animals and figures as well as circus accessories, illustrations, rhymes, and instructions for making the figures perform tricks.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "History." Schoenhut Piano Company. Accessed February 12, 2013. [http://www.toypiano.com/about\\_history.asp](http://www.toypiano.com/about_history.asp).

<sup>2</sup> Jenk, Torben. "Workshop of the World." Albert Schoenhut (Toys). May 2007. Accessed February 12, 2013. <http://www.workshopoftheworld.com/kensington/schoenhut.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Parnett, Michelle. "Global Toy News." 'Global Toy News' October 31, 2012. Accessed February 13, 2013. <http://www.globaltoynews.com/2012/10/the-strongs-artifact-of-the-month-schoenhuts-humpty-dumpty-circus-the-greatest-toys-on-earth-1.html>.

The Decorative Arts Museum contains eight of the original individual pieces from various sets.<sup>4</sup> The first four of these items are various figures one might see at the circus—all painted, smiling, and standing proud. The first piece in this collection is an 8-inch circus clown; he is wearing a once brightly colored white and red striped outfit with gigantic red shoes. Obviously worn, the condition of this clown is understandable because a clown like this was probably among the first dolls made for the Circus and was patented in 1903. Other dolls included the Ringmaster, Lion Tamer, Gent and Lady Acrobats, and Lady Circus Rider. Many of these original pieces are difficult to come across, and an original piece such as this is a rare find; this happy clown is arguably the most valuable collectable on hand.

Chipped and missing some paint, the next piece in the set is a 6-inch male doll (circa 1910); this is the “Ringmaster” of the Circus. With his red vest, khaki stockings, and tall black socks, he is displayed standing apart from the rest of the group as though he is announcing what is occurring to the rest of the crowd. The other male doll, known to have been circulating in 1925, is a 7.5-inch clown. This reduced-size version of the original clown has gray cone hat with a gray and red polka-dotted outfit. Rather than just its face painted, this clown’s whole body is solid white. The figure in the Decorative Arts Museum must have been through some sort of trauma (or the act of some child pretending it to be a poor dare-devil) because the clown’s face is almost entirely scratched and worn off. Where a once smiling, vibrant face must have been, now only a scuffed mark remains, showing the natural wood beneath. Concluding the group of “live figurines” in this set is the 7.5-inch long tiger, circa 1920; this is an elastic strung, jointed wooden figure. The tiger is one of the animals of Schoenhut’s Circus, and is by far my personal favorite. It is a bright orange with its trademark black stripes, and this piece has been kept in

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<sup>4</sup> The exact size of the figurines/accessories are displayed at the Decorative Arts Museum. All other information is the impression I had when I encountered/viewed these items on display.

spectacular condition for its age. The friendly tiger is positioned on its hind legs as though he is about to do some sort of trick or perhaps pounce.

The Decorative Arts Museum also contains four of the accessories/equipment for the Schoenhut's Circus. Each of these pieces was a part of an original set dating back to 1910. The smaller clown climbs on a simple, white, 12-inch wooden ladder. At the same time, this clown throws an extremely plain, 4-inch diameter, red, wooden hoop into the air. Beside it, the previously mentioned "Ringmaster" stands upon a tan 5-inch wooden chair. Finally, a safe distance away lies the 3.75-inch tall pedestal, which is painted a bright yellow with blue and green trim; this is what the tiger's front legs rest upon. All of the extra circus equipment simply adds to the delight, excitement, imagination, and authenticity of the overall experience.

Manufactured toys have been around for decades, but the unique touch of Albert Schoenhut makes him one of the most impressive of the first American toy-makers. His Humpty Dumpty Circus is a classic set of figurines and accessories which draws the participant into the exciting and blissful scene of the circus coming to town. For collectors today, this set is an extremely valuable find; in the early 1900s, these circus toys were a step into the imagination. The eight pieces of Schoenhut's Circus that the Decorative Arts Museum contains, whether in tattered or immaculate condition, draw the visitor's attention and imagination into a vivid reality that Albert made more than one hundred years ago with simple wood and paint.

#### Works Cited

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