

# Donation of the Month

**Object: Steiff Teddy Bear**  
**Catalog #: 1978.67.8**  
**Donor: Marcia Newitt Estate**



Arctophily — the love of teddy bears — began in November 1902 when President Theodore Roosevelt traveled to Mississippi to help settle a border dispute with Louisiana. While there his hosts took him bear hunting. After three days of roughing it with no game in sight, the guides used dogs to track and injure an old she-bear. Tying the ailing animal to a tree, they summoned the president. But Roosevelt decided that it would be unsportsmanlike to kill the captive bear; instead he ordered it be put down to end its suffering. And that was how the legend of Teddy's bear was born.

When *Washington Post* political cartoonist Clifford Berryman heard the story, he sketched a cartoon titled "Drawing the Line in Mississippi," a phrase which played up both the border dispute as well as Roosevelt's refusal to shoot a captive bear. In the cartoon a man holds a rope tied around the throat of an adult bear while TR stands with his rifle, his back turned against the sad scene and his hand held out as if to stop what was happening. Berryman's cartoon immediately captured the public's attention. In an effort to capitalize on its popularity and further its already-powerful message, his subsequent renderings depicted a cute bear cub rather than an old black bear. It is the image of this baby bear that is most often recalled when folks discuss the history of teddy bears.

When Russian immigrants Morris and Rose Michtom saw the cartoon, they were inspired to put a stuffed bear that Rose had made in the window of their of Brooklyn stationary and novelty store. They wrote to the president asking for his permission to call them "Teddy's Bears." He agreed and the charming little bear became a sensation, leading the Michtoms to found the Ideal Novelty and Toy Company, the first manufacturer of teddy bears in the United States.

At the same time across the Atlantic another stuffed bear was making his debut. Margarete Steiff (1847-1909) was born in Germany and spent her life in a wheelchair after a babyhood bout with polio. Determined to live an active life, she bought a sewing machine and started a small business selling clothing and household articles which she fashioned from felt. In 1880 she made an elephant-shaped pincushion which had unexpected success as a child's plaything. Steiff continued making her elephants and by 1886 had sold over 5,000 of them; she expanded her line to include other soft toy animals and a business was born.

Joining the growing company were Steiff's nephews including Richard Steiff, a former art student who was fond of sketching zoo and circus animals. Based on Richard's drawings, Steiff's first prototype bear was manufactured in 1902. *Bär 55 PB* was 55 centimeters tall when seated (about 22 inches), plush (P = in German, *plusch*), and jointed (B = *beweglich*). It was fashioned of mohair plush, a new fabric designed to look like fur which was made from the silky wool of Angora goats, and stuffed with excelsior (fine wood shavings) which gave it a hard, stiff body. Steiffs' bear didn't look like an idealized bear cub but rather like the real thing, with a long snout and a humped back between its shoulder blades. When it was displayed at the 1903 Leipzig toy fair, the stuffed bear didn't get much of a reaction from European buyers. But an enterprising American ordered 3,000 of the toys, hoping to capitalize on the growing popularity of Teddy's bears.

Teddy-bear fever swept the United States during Roosevelt's second administration, 1905-09. American and German manufacturers churned them out in a variety of shapes, sizes, and colors; the Germans had the advantage, though, because of their long toymaking tradition. The bears infiltrated many aspects of society. Photographers posed children with them, fashionable women carried them about or took them to tea, and songs and books were written about them. One lucky bear was given as a birthday present in 1921 to a little English boy named Christopher Robin; his father, A.A. Milne, went on to write many tales about "Winnie-the-Pooh" and his friends.

The bear's popularity continued to increase despite two world wars and the Great Depression. Novelty bears appeared dressed in roller skates or sported flashing electric eyes or turned somersaults with the aid of internal clockwork. Some came equipped with a trunk full of accessories such as swimsuits, toy trains, and jump ropes. Teddy's appearance transformed through the years as well. Rayon or "artificial silk" became a popular fabric for his body, while his boot-button eyes changed into glass and his hard straw or excelsior stuffing was replaced with kapok, a silky down found in the seeds of a tropical tree. After WWII, when easy-to-laundry synthetic materials became readily available and desirable, teddy bears sported nylon or acrylic plush fur, vinyl muzzles, plastic eyes, and foam-rubber stuffing.

Up until the 1940s most teddy bears were handmade with a high quality of craftsmanship, but following WWII inexpensive, mass-produced bears began arriving from the Far East. Older, well established companies like Steiff and Ideal suffered, and the teddy bear went into a decline. Its popularity rebounded when British actor Peter Bull spoke out on television about his love for the bears and their emotional resonance to adults; his mother had given away his beloved Teddy when he was 16 and he always remembered his childhood grief. After receiving thousands of letters of support he wrote *Bear With Me* in 1969, which helped launch today's teddy bear-collecting craze.

Another important factor in the bear's resurgence was contributed by American dollmaker Beverly Port. Known as the mother of "teddy bear artistry," Port showed one of her handmade bears at a doll show in 1974. A subsequent slide show of her work made available through the United Federation of Doll Clubs sparked a new trend — designer teddy bears. Artists now carefully fashion bears out of a wide range of luxury or vintage materials; some might wear fashions of long ago, have music boxes tucked inside them, or be patterned after historical personages or fictional characters.

Like antique bears, designer bears command high prices. In the late 1970s the first designer bears sold for about \$100, a price that raised quite a few eyebrows. To satisfy the demand for hard-to-find or -afford antique bears, replicas are being made. Today the market for teddy bears continues to grow, as witnessed by the many magazines and books devoted to the topic and the glut of "collectable" bears such as those in the Ty Beanie Babies® line. In 1999 \$441 million dollars worth of teddy bears were sold in the

U.S. — that's a lot of bear!

The Museum is fortunate to have a teddy bear in its collections, but it is a little one, measuring only 3½ inches in length. With its jointed limbs, mohair plush fur, and glass beads for eyes, it's readily identifiable as a Steiff because of the small metal button or stud in its left ear. (In 1904 the Steiff company began adding the button in an effort to distinguish true Steiff products from low-quality imitations.) As yet we've been unable to track down for certain its date of manufacture, but preliminary research suggests 1908-11; some accounts suggest Steiff didn't make small bears until the 1950s.

Marcia Newitt bequeathed this tiny teddy to the Museum in 1978. It was part of her miniature toy collection, of which the Museum is fortunate to have about 50 items. She also collected and donated several other collections including open salts, turn-of-the-20th-century dolls, and fairy lamps, many of which have been on display from time to time in the Museum's 1895 Hawkins House.

### **CREDITS**

Pauline Cockrill's book, *The Teddy Bear Encyclopedia* (1993); Marianne Clay's history about the teddy bear for the *Teddy Bear and Friends* magazine website ([www.teddybearandfriends.com](http://www.teddybearandfriends.com)); the article "TR & Teddy" on the Theodore Roosevelt Association website ([www.theodoreroosevelt.org](http://www.theodoreroosevelt.org)); info about Margarete Steiff and her company's origins found on the Steiff company website ([www.steifusa.com](http://www.steifusa.com)); and Joan Greene's article "Modern Teddy Bear Artistry: The First Teddy Bear Artists" in *Teddy Bear and Friends* magazine (Jan/Feb 2000).