

Boys' toys take off

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All aboard: (from left) a yellow Corgi Corvette Stingray sold for a bargain \$25 this month without the box; this vintage stationary steam engine sold for \$150 despite rust and damage; the Spirit of Progress train sold for \$400, double the upper estimate.

Yes, you can buy back your childhood. Thousands of otherwise well-adjusted men collect the model trains, cars and planes they had as small boys (or wished they did).

Women seem not to be afflicted with this incurable disease.

Vintage model trains have long been a popular passion. The collecting of model cars and other vehicles is a more recent phenomenon, at least in Australia. Those made by Corgi and Dinky have been the big sellers over the past decade, and now the smaller-scale Matchbox models have taken off.

This market includes a number of wealthy professionals, such as a High Court judge who specialises in Sydney buses. Another collector has 8000 models displayed in a two-car, climate-controlled garage along with a slot-car track.

Prices achieved for rarities have risen dramatically over the past decade. A record Australian price of \$6500 was achieved in December 2010 by Leonard Joel auctions in Melbourne for a green Matchbox London-style bus, sold here in very limited numbers.

The bus wasn't in mint condition but came in the original box, considered essential by a growing number of investors who have entered the market. A box can increase value by as much as 10 times.

Prices achieved for rarities have risen dramatically over the past decade. There's enough interest for Leonard Joel to hold monthly toy auctions (the next is on February 28 at noon); while Trains, Planes & Automobiles, with shops in Annandale in Sydney and at Mount Victoria in the Blue Mountains, now holds online auctions on the first Monday night of the month.

Their February auction was the most successful to date, with the highest number of online bidders and some results that amazed even the experts.

The highlight was a plastic model kit of the Caltex/Australian National Lines Empress of Australia ship, unassembled and still in its original box. Bidding started at \$20, sailed past estimates of \$30 to \$60 and eventually sold for \$240. There were 16 absentee bids on this item.

Another surprise was the Maurlyn 0-gauge Spirit of Progress set, also in the original box, selling for \$400. This was double the upper estimate and the successful bidder said he was prepared to pay twice that amount.

Another item to do well was a Britains boxed set of Land Rover, horse box and horse, which sold for \$130. This is part of a large collection found in mint condition in the storage room of a country newsagency.

While trains usually do well at Trains, Planes & Automobiles auctions, the rare and unusual also score, such as a vintage stationary steam engine designed to fit into a model boat. It sold for \$150, despite some damage and specks of rust.

A set of three Matchbox Thunderbirds figures (Virgil, Gordon and Scott Tracy), all boxed, sold well above estimates for \$95. The presence of Lady Penelope would have surely pushed this into three figures.

There are potential bargains to be found. A yellow Corgi Corvette Stingray, in reasonable nick, sold for \$25 without the box. These are usually priced at \$50 to \$80 in antique centres.

After a low-key start in 2011, these online auctions appear to be taking off. Trains, Planes & Automobiles owner Keith Mentiplay places ads in the auctions classifieds in this paper and more recently advertised in the British-based Collectors Gazette. This attracted enthusiastic bidders from Britain, New Zealand, France and the Netherlands, and a Brazilian collector interested in models of Australian cars.

In May 2012 they began streaming live video of items and audio during auctions. One overseas bidder asked to view a particular aspect of an item while it was being auctioned. Running commentaries by toy experts are also provided.

This is a tightly knit network so the news spreads fast. Mentiplay says his email database is growing by about 100 a month. He gets the feeling that collectors are starting to spend again, and some have obviously decided to invest in antique toys.

The next Trains, Planes & Automobiles auction is on Monday, March 4. The catalogue and bidding details are on antiquetoys.com.au. Sydney collectors can view selected items at the 276 Johnston Street, Annandale gallery on the Friday and Saturday before the sale, 10am-4pm.