



Construct your own portfolio

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In an Anglican church hall at Mount Victoria, at the top of the Blue Mountains, a small group of enthusiasts gathers on the first Monday of each month to bid on a variety of vintage toys. These auctions are run by Trains, Planes & Automobiles (TPA), which has a shop across the road and another at Annandale in Sydney's inner west.

As the name suggests, model trains are the usual priority but on the first Monday of September the main attraction was Meccano.

Two significant collections were listed for sale, including some sets in mint condition in the original packaging. These, which still had stickers from the David Jones store in Elizabeth Street where they were bought in the 1950s, were apparently never used. They were being sold by descendants of the original owner.

The sale of mint-condition Meccano was rare enough for three Sydney collectors to book rooms overnight at a nearby hotel.

Meccano sets were originally numbered one to 10, with value and rarity increasing numerically.

Nos. 1 to 5 are the ones most likely to be found in junk shops, usually incomplete and overpriced. They fetch \$50 or less at auction. No. 10 is the holy grail for collectors, and one of these in mint condition sold for \$6000 through TPA before the global financial crisis came along to spoil the fun.

Keith Mentiplay from TPA says a mint No. 10 would now be worth about \$4000. He estimates that overall, prices for vintage toys are down 60 per cent on pre-GFC values but reckons a mint-condition Meccano No. 10 is still a handy investment.

That's if you can find one.

None were at this month's auction but a No. 9 was, and it sold for \$650, considered a real bargain by other collectors. A No. 8 in very good condition also sold for \$650. Estimates for both were about the \$1000 mark but the vendors who inherited this collection were still delighted, and probably surprised, with the results.

A No. 8A set sold for \$600. The A-prefix sets were sold as additions to an existing set. For example, the 8A upgrades the standard No. 8 set to a No. 9.

Also valuable are special-edition kits and Meccano after-market accessories such as electric motors and transformers. A 20-volt electric motor sold for \$60 and a transformer for \$80. These are needed to transform the larger Meccano models into spectacular working machinery.

According to the 1950s hierarchy, only spoilt brats would have working models in their bedrooms. The railway service crane, as featured on the lids of the more expensive boxes, is the best-known example. Spoilt brats could also build an Eiffel Tower, cargo ship and a working boom bridge.

These days, however, the vintage sets that are bought at auction are more likely to remain unused.

"Most of the older buyers collect them just to have them," Mentiplay says. "Only the younger people tend to build them."

The Meccano concept was patented in 1901 by Frank Hornby, an inventor from Liverpool, England, who also gave the world Hornby model trains. Meccano is still produced today - made in China - although the majority of collectors prefer examples from the classic "red and green" period. The colours changed to yellow and black in 1964, and these definitely affect value. A No. 8 in yellow and black sold for \$300 this month, half that of an equivalent red-and-green set.

TPA's monthly auctions attract a core group of Australian online bidders plus regulars from Britain, the US, Brazil, Argentina and New Zealand. A collector from the Netherlands snapped up the No. 8A set that other bidders thought was a steal at \$600.

Mentiplay says he now has 4000 collectors registered for online catalogues and about 100 regulars follow the auctions. The second tranche of the larger collection of Meccano listed this month will appear later this year. Most of the items are in exceptional condition.

The cultural significance of Meccano should not be underestimated. Mentiplay says it was responsible for producing a generation of mechanically advanced young men (and we assume some women). He's noticed that many of those now investing in retro Meccano have had successful careers in engineering and mechanics.

For details of the auctions, see antiquetoys.com.au.



Nuts and bolts of a model hobby

A 1950's 'red and green' No. 9 set in mint condition.
Sold for \$650.