

The antique Bear Market

Daniel Agnew



“I have been involved with bears for over 30 years and have witnessed the roller-coaster which has been the teddy bear market”

LEFT: Christie's 1993 Teddy Bear auction catalogue.

ABOVE RIGHT: The character Lord Sebastian Flyte and Aloysius the teddy bear from *Brideshead Revisited*

RIGHT: Daniel and some of his collection.



DANIEL AGNEW



Began collecting in 1982

Worked at Christie's auction house from 1989 to 2007

As a leading antique teddy bear specialist, Daniel's opinion and comment on teddy bears is frequently sought by the media and leading auction houses.

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From a vague recollection of my childhood, I think I started collecting bears in the early 1980s. Oh I wish I had had more than pocket/birthday money to spend on them. They were so cheap! It was quite useful having a mother as an antique dealer; I was able to snaffle the odd one! This means I have been involved with bears for over 30 years and have witnessed the rollercoaster which has been the teddy bear market. During the 1980s I watched the market from afar, seeing items valued on the Antiques Roadshow. The occasional one was reported in the press. (It's probable that ITV's *Brideshead Revisited* and the starring role of the bear Aloysius had a lot to do with romanticizing the antique bear!) It seemed during the mid to late 1980s, that a record was broken at every auction, either by Sotheby's or Christie's, £3000, £4000, £4500... but when I joined Christie's as a saleroom assistant (posh speak for porter!) in March 1989, one of my earliest bear experiences was staring at Alfonzo through a rather tatty



display cabinet! This was Christie's May doll and bear sale, sadly I wasn't working on the view, so didn't handle him; something I have always regretted. But he made a staggering sum of £12,450 (I believe three times the world record at the time). Bear fever was in the air! Later in 1989, Happy, a 1926 Steiff was bought by Paul and Rosemary Volpp as a wedding anniversary present for an even more staggering £55,000. On the

back of the strength of the market, Christie's had their first all bear auction in December 1993, where a blue Steiff Elliot made £49,500; then in 1994 the world record was once again broken by the famous Teddy Girl, for £110,000. Many collectors came to the market during the 1990s; all hungry to buy themselves an antique bear or a bear collection. It was such fun. Prices were high. In the auctions everything sold. There was a real buzz to it all. Well like all art/antique markets a bubble always bursts, and so it did.

ABOVE CENTRE: Daniel's last Christie's auction in 2010

I would say it started to slide in the very late 1990s, early 2000s.

The first area to suffer was post-war bears - the 1950s Steiffs, post-war Schucos and Merrythought Cheekies. At one stage large Cheekies were making £1000 and Schuco post-war yes/no musical bear in excellent condition were getting £2500 or £3000.

Their prices started to fall and that caused a certain amount of panic, making some collectors actually stop buying them and this made the price fall even further! Whereas in traditional markets like paintings and porcelain, collectors are used to the rise and fall of the market and stick with it, the bear market wasn't used to it. It was all new to many bear folk. Around the same time eBay came along and as this platform picked up, being able to buy an antique bear 24 hours a day,

365 days a year, it made bears seem to be much more plentiful. Also the structure of eBay doesn't give each bear the same platform, so the final price is much more random. A leap of faith is needed to buy something expensive! Bear collections were also getting large and they take a lot of care. It was noticeable that people were getting fed up with finding dusty bears, or a moth attack! Let alone discovering their bear was worth half of what

what they paid in the heat of an auction.

However I truly believe that at last the interest is growing again. What a great opportunity it is to buy bears at reasonable prices.

A Schuco yes/no bear in excellent condition once reached a low of £200 or £300, but is now back at £400 to £600. Is there any reason it can't be in the thousands again? People are coming to collecting in a much more rational way. Rarely do you get an unrealistic price at auction, people now know the price of things. Collectors have a good number of knowledgeable and fair dealers to buy from. They view eBay sales with care. Buying at auction has become



Then Christie's in 2007 stopped selling bears. The Christie's name had been key in driving the market and giving collecting bears a certain status. How nice it was to say you were going to Christie's to buy a bear, to get yourself a nice Christie's carrier bag (no charge!) It added extra layer of prestige and provenance to your bear. So through the noughties the bear market struggled.

easier, you can now live-bid at any UK auction via a service called www.the-saleroom.com who host most regional auction house catalogues. Most items are photographed and it is becoming increasingly easier to have your items posted (buyers need to ask for condition reports). Special Auction Services, where I have been running auctions since 2013, have a brilliant in house packing and posting department

with very fair prices. The delights of Facebook have also made it easier for everyone to keep in touch, groups of collectors share their latest buys, or share a fake bear listed on eBay or in an auction. This all helps to make a happy stable market. So let's turn to buying and keeping antique and vintage bears.



-Keep the curtains shut. Have a special room where you can keep the light levels down. Finally buy sensibly, always do your homework; don't rush into collecting. Absorb the subject, visit an auction and handle good bears, go to bear fairs and know how much something should cost. Maybe every now and then you have to pay over the odds for a bear you just have to have, but make sure you balance this out by finding a bargain.

Some recommendations after visiting many a collection:-

- Try where possible, to keep everything under glass.
- Buy a nice cabinet then fill it, don't buy 100 bears and then try to find a cabinet.
- Of course you can keep the odd one out in a chair, but check regularly for moth, dust and fading.
- If you are a madly obsessive collector like me, keep your collection in plastic tubs with lids.
- Protect from moths with pheromone traps, moth bomb occasional and proper moth repellent strips. Lavender and cedar balls don't work alone!

PREVIOUS PAGE:

CENTRE:

A Merrythought Cheeky.

THIS PAGE:

TOP:

A post-war Steiff teddy bear.

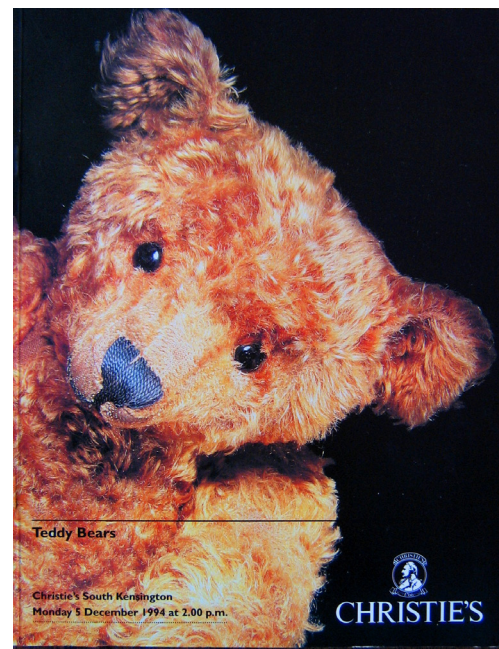
RIGHT:

An excellent condition yes/no musical Schuco teddy bear, 1950s

I've bought a bear I have wanted to keep in a group lot at auction, it has come with a handful of other items, I have sold them (eBay or Facebook) and they have paid for the one I have kept.

So to conclude! I firmly believe the bear market is steady again now. It is no longer a new collecting field, it's much more

robust. So let's all get buying the old chaps. We need to secure their future. There are many, many venerable old bears out there that need a nice compassionate caring new home. I hope that might be you!



ABOVE:
Christie's 1994 Teddy Bear Catalogue

