Potty Bench

Place of origin: German Democratic Republic (potties, made)
German Democratic Republic (bench, probably, made)

Date: 1970s (made)
Artist/Maker: Unknown (maker)

Materials and Techniques: Wooden mortise-and-tenon bench with bolted wooded brackets and two pivot hinges; linoleum glued to wood; plastic potties

Museum number: B.7:1 to 5-2014

Gallery location: In Storage

Public access description

This potty bench was used for toilet training in the 1970s, probably in an East German (GDR) nursery as the potties have the marks 'Made in GDR/DDR' on their bases.

The Communist German Democratic Republic (GDR) placed great importance on education and its nurseries and preschool education provided free nursery places to the many working mothers in East Germany. These state-run nurseries were equipped with potty benches on which, several times a day, every child sat down and remained seated until done. "This not only aimed at training [children] to use the toilet, it was a first step to social education." (quote from Berlin's DDR Museum).

The authoritarian and rigid lines on which these nurseries were run, encouraged children to group-think rather than using creativity and critical thinking in their education. The group toilet training on potty benches was one of the many methods used by the state nurseries to programme children in early childhood to follow orders in a national culture that rewarded conformity and penalised individualism.

Descriptive line

A wooden potty bench with four plastic potties, used in a German nursery, 1970s

Physical description

A wooden bench, supported by trapezium sides which serve as legs, and a pivot-hinged seat that lifts to reveal four plastic potties, two blue and two pink. When the seat is raised it acts as a back rest for the potty users and when lowered onto wooden brackets, it forms the bench and storage locker for the potties.

The potties sit, side by side, on a timber board which is covered with cream and brown marbled, plastic laminate on its top face. Two horizontal braces run the length of the bench, attached to the lower part of the trapezium sides/legs; these add structural support and help the potties remain in place. The trapezium sides/legs are edged with grey rubber. The moulded plastic potties have slightly raised backs to support the child and a raised part at the front which fits between the child's legs when seated. The potties are stackable; each has a hole on either side to aid carrying. Three potties (one blue and two pink) have identical inscriptions: 'Made in GDR / Polyha' on their bases. The fourth potty is marginally smaller, slightly paler blue and has the inscription 'Made in DDR / Polyha on its base'.

Dimensions

Length: 110 cm bench, Height: 34.5 cm bench, lid closed, Height: 44.5 cm bench, lid open, Depth: 33 cm bench, Height: 13.2 cm potty, Width: 22.5 cm potty, Depth: 21.5 cm potty, Width: 22.3 cm potty, Depth: 21.7 cm potty

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Object history note

This potty bench is part of a group of objects purchased from a sale 'Design for Kids' at the auction house Tajan in Paris. The sale was dedicated to the collection of post war children's furniture belonging to German furniture collector and design gallery owner, Dr Stefan Reinke. His collection has also appeared in the exhibition and publication 'Fidgety Philip! A Design History of Children's Furniture' shown at the Imperial Furniture Collection in Vienna and MARTa in Herford, Germany in 2006/7.

In text written by Dr Reinke, for the Tajan sale catalogue in 2014, he explained his reasons behind starting to collect children's designed furniture: "Of course my three sons inspired me but also the fact that this beautiful theme was almost ignored 20 years ago. However, this also had advantages for me: the pieces of interest were still available and their size allowed me to store them without problems. First, I brought home everything that attracted me. The strong use of colours and unusual, often experimental forms in vintage children's furniture and play objects was fascinating. In contrast to toy collectors, only large pieces interested me. Soon I realised that the kids' versions of architect designed pieces were normally much more rare than the respective editions for adults. In the early days of collecting it was evident that..."
information such as designers, makers and the time of origin was important but only a few books existed.

Dr Reinke collected over 300 objects, a great number of which were chairs and seating. For him "The design history may be illustrated very well with children's chairs, since many important designers made these for kids...The most impressive part of my collection were the designers themselves."

Dr Reinke felt that a pivotal moment in the history of children's designed furniture came at the beginning of the 20th century when "the progressive educational movement emphasised the special demands of children." Up until this point the principle of children's furniture design had, for the most part, been the downscaling of large furniture. Dr Reinke wrote: "The striking role of children's furniture in the history of design becomes evident by its role as an experimental field for prototypes and innovations. Many things are easier to test in the small scale."

(Quotes taken from text written by Dr Stefan Reinke in the Tajan sale catalogue, 2014)

'The beginnings of children's furniture as design objects can be retraced very accurately: In 1866 a page in the catalogue of the bentwood furniture manufacturers Gebrüder Thonet offered for the first time serially produced furniture that was specifically designed for children. After 1900, furniture for children became an interesting task for modernist architects and interior designers...and...after the First World War, furniture for kindergartens and classrooms became an important and socially motivated designing task.'

(Edited text from 'Fidgety Philip! A Design History of Children's Furniture' by Eva B. Ottillinger)

URL

http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O1298366/potty-bench-unknown/