

The Family

A group of wooden figurines for children and adults.

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Place of publication, Gothenburg Sweden

April 2012

Degree Project, MA Program in Child Culture and Design, 120 hecs

Abstract

The Family project is an attempt to recreate a group of figurines made of mix materials manly wood with a background story that is relevant to both children and adults. The theme of family has been chosen to reinforce the background story as a familiar subject for audience and users. The family project is a continuation of a previous project called the Nolanders which has been well received by the audience and this success encouraged me to perceive and continue with the subject matter around a new and more global theme. The family project tries to open up a new possibility toward connecting traditional craftsmanship in the specific subject of wooden toys and the modern way of designing toys for the contemporary market. The appeal to adult is also part of the project concern. How to design a wooden toy that can create popularity and demand between adults representing one of the main target consumers of wooden goods.

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Introduction

Background

As a designer and design student I've been involved in many projects dealing with materials which were known in the design field for long time. I worked with different kind of plastic, metals, foams and even paper for creating paper crafts and lighting objects. My interest towards toys and toy design was the main reason for this material studies. During these material researches I developed a collection of robot toys. The main purpose of these creations was to show how far I can go with the techniques involved in the realization of the concept. And how each material is suited for the different purposes. Working with these divers materials has also made me concern about the dominant material in the toy market itself.

Plastic and its divers choice of material is the main dominant player in toy industry simply because of its accessibility, low production cost and overall its simple way of molding for diversity of forms and colures.

My interest toward wooden products and toys kept growing when I started my master studies at HDK School of craft and design in Gothenburg, Sweden. The country of woods and wooden design. For curiosity I had a visit to toys r us (the biggest toy retailer in the world) in Gothenburg to see how wooden toys are attracting attentions in Sweden with its reach history of wooden toys. And except few parents walking around Brio shelf which is the main player in wooden toy industry in Sweden the rest of children and parents were more in front of Hasbro and mattel shelves, the biggest manufacturer of plastic toys in the world. These were the main reason for me to write and investigate throe an article about modern wooden toys and how as a designer can suggest there introduction of wooden toys to today's modern children and kids.

Why wooden toys?

To answer this question we have to go back to the origin of toys which by far it is not so clear how the first toy was made and from what material and how it looked like. But every historian refers to clay, stone and wood as the main materials used in toys. Especially wooden horses which was found in Egyptians temples prove the theory of wood been one of the first material used to make toys and playable artifacts. Fast forward to the eighteenth-century the country in which toy making first began to develop as an industry, far in advance of anywhere else, was Germany. Toy industry

in that area was family driven businesses and the toys were mostly folk wooden toys for children and specially Christmas market. The tradition of wooden toy making has still its roots in today's German industry. Many of Germany's traditional handcrafted wooded toys and decorations come from Seiffen. There, specially trained craftspeople work to preserve the centuries-old techniques and pass them on to the next generation. Seiffen in Saxony is a center of the wooden toy industry, home to more than 100 Christmas decoration manufacturers and toy workshops.

A craft man's dream

To understand more how is it to work as a special wood craft man designing and making toys I bring the opinion of two professionals in this article. **John Michael Linck** who is in this profession for 32 years is one of them. he has something to say about the values of wooden toys; "Each year Americans spend over twenty-four billion dollars on toys for their children. Most of these toys are disposable and are enjoyed for a few years, at best. They are made on high-speed automated machinery, untouched by human hands. Much of the price paid goes for packaging and advertising, rather than the toys themselves. Part of a toy's cost funds the creation of children's television; which is designed to instill desire in children for a toy manufacturer's latest products. This year's hit movie will spin off a complete line of toys that will need replacing when the next blockbuster film is released. Remember the toys that were part of your childhood. Do you think today's children will have similar memories of Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles or Mighty Morphin Power Rangers? I hope your children will remember you when your grandchild gallops away on the horse you gave thirty years earlier. I hope they have a set of wooden blocks or a special doll from a special aunt. So few things in life are permanent today. We need to cultivate memories to insure they are always vivid. I want you to give the children in your life not only better toys, but better memories. A wooden toy requires more of the child's imagination and creativity than the toy industry's current offerings. This means more play value, more education, more cognitive development. They cannot turn on the switch and watch it; they need to touch and manipulate it. They will combine it with other toys in ways completely unexpected. You have probably seen children who are more attracted to a shipping container than its contents. Children's imaginations are on high speed and need very little encouragement. Giving a basic toy of a natural material is even more special because of the relationship you share. "My grandpa/ma had it made especially for me.", is good to hear. And, since well-made wooden toys will last far beyond us givers/makers, you get the memories as a bonus. I hope your children and grandchildren will have fond memories of you. Durable wooden toys will help call those memories to mind".

Craftsman **Takeji Nakagawa** is one of my favorites toy and sculpture designer which I followed his works during several years. Due to my common interest of robot toys I share a big respect toward this man and his concepts. he creates tributes to childhood, nature and the future. The artisan crafts things like animals and futuristic robots out of four types of wood: keyaki (a Japanese tree of the genus Zelkova), teak, walnut and white ash. These four types of wood are joined through a traditional handicraft process called yosegi-mokuzougan (joined wooden block construction), and the different types of woods and different textures create lively patterns. He says: "I often get asked 'Why do you make robots with wood?,'" says Nakagawa. "I don't really have an exact answer for it but I often relate my robots with 'future.'" For

Nakagawa, the future isn't a place filled with metal and skyscrapers, but with trees. "I don't think humans can live without trees no matter what advances technology makes," he adds. "When I think of 'future,' I cannot help thinking of 'past' at the same time. Trees take a long time (tens and hundreds years) to grow and show us their beauty (the product of their past). I think that I have responsibilities as a craftsman and an artist of breathing new life into these trees. I have a job to link 100 years in the past and 100 years in the future through my work. These are my values toward my work."



Kay Bojesen (1886–1958) was a Danish silversmith and designer who is best known for creating a wooden monkey which was exhibited at the Victoria and Albert museum in London in the nineteen-fifties, and which today is considered a design classic. Bojesen was born August 15, 1886 in Copenhagen, Denmark. In 1922, Bojesen began designing wooden toys, typically about six to ten inches tall, with moveable limbs. These included a teak and limba monkey (1951), an oak elephant, a bear made of oak and maple, a rocking horse of beech, a parrot, a dachshund, and military figures including a drummer, a private with gun and a standard-bearer. In 1990, Danish design house Rosendahl bought the rights to the toys. "The lines should smile," Kay Bojesen once explained, when asked how his famous wooden toys came about. Kay Bojesen was a craftsman, not a designer. He disliked working with pen and paper. Things took shape, they should work and perform. Objects were made from need, not from artistic reflection. If they felt good in your hand, they would please your eyes as well.



Here is an interview by **Amanda Talbot** with **Morten Jensen**, CEO, from ARCHITECTMADE

Endangered Danish Wooden Toys Being Saved By Chinese Wood turners

Did you know Danish handcrafted iconic wooden toys are now being handcrafted in China? I would like to raise the question: Does an old craft in one country where the locals don't have the craftsman any longer to make the designs become new again because they are now being handcrafted by a different country filled with wood turners who are eager to learn about the quality level and detailed work of traditional Danish craftsmanship?

This subject came to my attention in 2007 whilst I was working on British ELLE Decoration. I was at an event celebrating Scandinavian design and over canapes and champagne the main UK supplier of Scandinavian design, Skandium, told me that Kay Bojesen's hand crafted wooden monkey produced by Brdr. Kruger was endangered in becoming extinct. The reason: the skilled craftsman were retiring or dying and sadly they couldn't find young apprentices who wanted to learn the skill. I was literally devastated and it was the first time it came to my attention how craft in the western world in general was in crisis. Last year I noticed there was new additions of handcrafted wooden Danish toys appearing in design stores. Well obviously this raised a lot of questions for me. Has there been a Denmark initiative to educate young people in the craft of this iconic Danish skill? Well with so many other countries in the same situation in losing key craft skills I wanted to find out what this initiative was so I could share this with other government bodies across the globe. I was put in contact with the producer of the Kristian Vedel's Danish BIRDS, ARCHITECTMADE. Morten Jensen, CEO, from ARCHITECTMADE told me "there are only two professional wood turning companies in Denmark. One who produces the Kay Bojesen monkey and an even smaller one who makes the wooden BIRDS". With the demand of the wooden toys growing both producers of the monkeys and BIRDS were not able to find extra crafts people in Denmark or Europe who were able to make the their products who were willing to give the time to care about the details to make the wooden animals. The key to the wooden toys is although the products are handmade you should not be able to see that they are handmade. This is the perfection level both brands strive to achieve. "We want to be part of pushing the general public away from the use and throw away culture. We hope to make a few, well thought out, products that will last a lifetime," says Morten. With quality being the main concern for both companies, ARCHITECTMADE and Brdr. Kryger decided to find wood turners in

China who had the time to care about the details which many Danish suppliers simply did not have. ARCHITECTMADE are very proud to be teaching the quality level of high end Danish design to the Chinese craftsmen. Actually they feel that it is their responsibility to do so. "We are working very closely with them in order to insure that the quality is perfect. We have found that these small wood shops in China are eager to learn about the quality level and detailed work of traditional Danish craftsmanship," explains Morten. "It is however necessary that we work closely with them throughout the production cycle which is both challenging and rewarding". "The result has been that, although we proudly explain that some of our products are hand-made in Beijing, nobody can neither tell that they are made outside Denmark or that they are actually hand-made, which to us is a great success, since the craftsmanship is of this high quality". Isn't it the producers job to make these products in a quality that not only look perfect but also lasts for a very long time? Surely when the consumer picks up the wooden toys in store shouldn't they feel this immediately and then recognize that this is the reason for the price (and that it actually then is rather inexpensive)? Should people care where products are made, as long as the quality on every single product is high? The reality is if it wasn't for the craftsman in China the beautiful wooden toys of Denmark would be EXTINCT but now young children and adults will be able to enjoy a new handcrafted wooden monkey or bird for a very long time. "I think we are getting lazy in the west! We want everything to be as easy as possible. Learning and perfecting a craft takes time and few people value this anymore. I am sure it will change at some point again though", says Morten. "To me it is important that the skills and the ways of working is kept simultaneously with the benefits of big factory production from IKEA". With a country like China filled with craftsman who are eager to learn this Danish craft and be trained in the quality of detail that western people are too lazy to learn and now many young designers concentrating in the likes of 3D printing etc is it not a good thing that at least somewhere in the world that you will be able to gather the knowledge of this beautiful craft and hopefully continue to see the evolution of this design continue? Morten concludes, "I think a fundamental change in attitude in society is needed so it is cool again to be an engineer and a skilled craftsman. I am confident that at some time it will change back again, which is why it is important to maintain the knowledge till then".

Nostalgic parents fuel demand for wooden toys

Parents looking to recapture some of the magic of playing with a doll's house or building blocks are behind a surprise renaissance in classic wooden toys in the run-up to Christmas, new figures have revealed. Sales have hit record levels at John Lewis, with turnover up 24 per cent compared with a year ago. A wooden train set, which costs £20, is sold every six minutes. Best sellers at Hamleys include a £14.99 tub of building blocks and a Rivelin rocking horse costing £1,500. **Gwyneth Dear**, from the National Association of Toy and Leisure Libraries, said young children loved the tactility of wooden toys." They are sustainable, durable and can be passed down through the generations," she added. Even Tesco has started stocking wooden train sets, which a spokesman said "are proving to be very popular". Overall, plastic toys are still more popular than wooden ones. Britain imported 357 tons of plastic, rubber and textile toys from China last year, compared to 1.3 tons of wooden toys. **Gary Grant**, who runs The Entertainer chain of toy shops, said: "They are never going to

become a mass-market best seller. They are just too niche. Grandparents love to splash out on wooden stuff, but that doesn't mean the kids want it.” **Anthony King**, the finance director of John Crane, a manufacturer that specializes in wooden toys, said: "This market will continue to do well - there are sufficient numbers of people who earn enough and want to buy something just like they had as a child."

Other alternatives?

Toys are meant to be played but as we know the time frame which keeps the children attracted and interested to a toy is short and a child always asks for new toys this might also be a relevant reason for parents to spend their money on cheaper plastic toys. In this case there might be other ways for wooden toy market to keep itself alive and running and that is kinder gardens and schools. As we know kinder gardens needs a big quantity of quality toys which are durable for use and last longer than plastic toys. This is a good opportunity for wooden toy manufacturers to jump in and supply this growing need. Companies like ILKA in Sweden are a good example of this type of services. They are specialized on providing needed supplies for kinder gardens and elementary schools and are consider as a good client for wooden toy companies.

Designers and crafts man

I believe wooden toys and wooden toy manufacturing is far from being forgotten. If plastic toys are popular between children due to the variety of licensing and theme based play, wooden toys also can be marketed as being durable and overall better for the environment (considering the recourses and which type of wood is used). But with a smart twist it is also possible to bring themes and characters of popular shows in the wooden toys world or even create shows and character which are designated for wooden toy manufacturing. Of course this generation of children is far different than their parents and designing toys for children of this generation needs to be done with a conscious mind and with taste of modernity. This area is the meeting point of traditional manufacturing and modern product designing. I believe designers have a good opportunity to work side by side with crafts man and create modern and everlasting beautiful toys for children and parents.

I had a chance to have a collaboration project with BRIO the top wooden toy company in Sweden. I visited their showroom and my feeling about modern wooden toys became mixed after that day. I appreciated the effort of Designers coming up with new ideas of mixing wood and plastic to create theme based play like their train system. My only concern was the amount of wood parts actually used in these toys. It seemed in order to keep the production cost low they had to use more plastic. Off course they clamed they only use plastic where detail is needed and I would agree with this statement that due to the nature of wood adding details in the product has to be done by introducing plastic. My main question is why not coming up with themes that are not required to add so many plastic details. They always stated that they are competing with bigger player in the market like LEGO. But I would assume the nature of these two companies is very much different than each other and they do not need to compete in the same sector. BRIO is a reputable wooden toy company with a long history of working with craftsman. What they need is fresh ideas for toys made

in wood and investing on new and fresh craftsman and young designers. A collaboration between the two worlds.

Nolanders

Nolanders project was my starting effort to find a right balance between materials and forms based on a background story. My main goal was to understand the logic of materials (wood , plastic) and technic around a context. How to blend the story of a city and the material which these figurines were made of .

My main point of departure was the city of Gothenburg and its stories. I decided to create a group of toy robots with specific characteristics of Gothenburg and its people those toy robots were made of walnut and oak wood with some plastic parts the walnut represented the immigrants and the oak which is a typical Gothenburg tree represented the native Gothenburg people. I received very positive responds both from teachers and public who visited the exhibition. These robots were my first attempt on creating a more humanistic and simple design which immediately attracts the attention of viewers both in term of aesthetics and background story.



Implementation

My research through the wooden toy history and its current position in the market led my interest toward the final degree. What I had in mind for the final project was to continue with creating a group of figurines which would appeal for children the most and in the same time parents and adults would also appreciate them. So I had three goal in the plan, one; to have these figurines entirely made from various wood to keep

the tradition of wooden toys alive, two; easily be producible as oppose to Nolanders where the amount of parts and complexity of the build material made them very expensive for production. And finally and most importantly to make them child friendly by decreasing the size and the amount of parts.

The theme

A group of figurine with more or less the same style creates a small family, this is the first idea which came to my mind and I decided to keep developing it. When I wrote my project description I mentioned a bout a group or a family of figurine which reminds the warm feeling of a family. The tutors reminded me that not everyone are raised in a warm family and the word family nessecerily is not a utopian definition. Therefore I decided to find the definition of family.

In human context, a family (from Latin: familia) is a group of people affiliated by consanguinity, affinity, or co-residence. In most societies it is the principal institution for the socialization of children. Anthropologists most generally classify family organization as matrilocal (a mother and her children); conjugal (a wife, husband, and children, also called nuclear family; and consanguinal (also called an extended family) in which parents and children co-reside with other members of one parent's family.

In science, the term "family" has come to be used as a means to classify groups of objects as being closely and exclusively related. In the study of animals it has been found that many species form groups that have similarities to human "family"—often called "packs.

My final project like all my other works needed to have a background story. Story telling is one of the main functions that trigger the play in the form of role-play. To set up a story I needed to find strung inspirations therefore I start looking for contemporary movies that tells about families.



The stories in these movies where all focused around families with problems like seek members, children with lack of attention and parents separation. These stories and the characters which they have a role on them later on helped me to decide upon which member and character I should choose for the project. The characters also where a source of inspiration for the form and shape of the body.

Animals were also the point of interest for my project specifically in terms of aesthetics. And penguins were a perfect example for a well-defined and harmonious group. Simple and minimal body shape with lots of expression.



Stories and open ended play

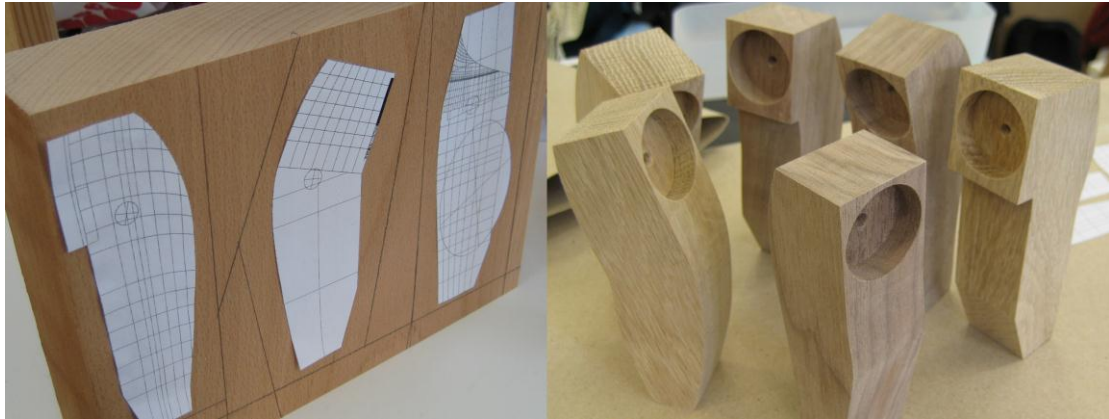
I believe in order to have an open ended play the ingredients of play has to be as simple as possible in order to trigger the imagination of child. of course play signals have to be present for the child to recognize the object as playable. Figurines by nature have these play signals and that is what make them possible to identify them from static sculptures. Interaction with the figurine creates play and this play often appears as role-play. Role-play is a way to create stories by children. My main goal is to let the children and parents create their own stories and moments with these figurines and not give them a ready and set story. I would like to avoid theme type of play and let the children and parents decide.

Design Process

With all the requirement set I start the sketch phase. How to create a group of family? Do they have to be in group or let the viewer and user choose each member? How the body shape has to be designed to find the trace of a single family? In simple word how to make them related to each other?



The best way to answer these questions is to try the shapes and create a small group.



I decided to differentiate each character with using different type of wood and sculpting the body shape based on the characteristic of the persona like sad, grumpy, proud, lazy and so on.

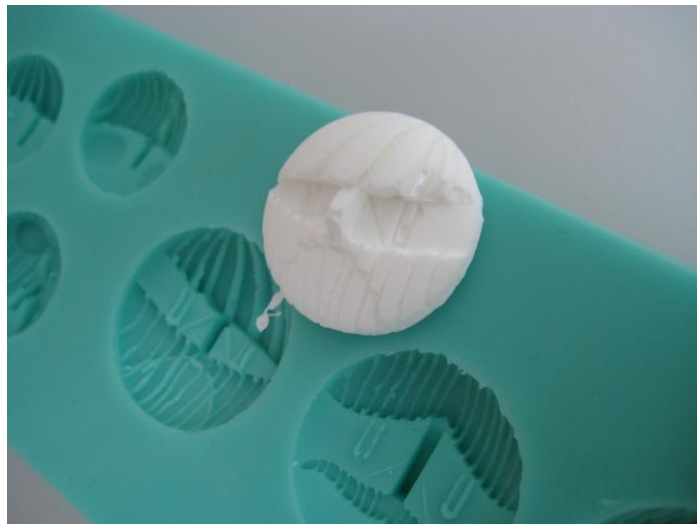
To create the faces I decide to use my own technic which is sculpting in a computer aided software (in this case Rhino 3d) and 3d printing the result on a suitable material.



The faces came out great in term of sculpt but I was not sure about the transparency



So I try to mold them in a silicon mold and feel in the mold with liquid white plastic

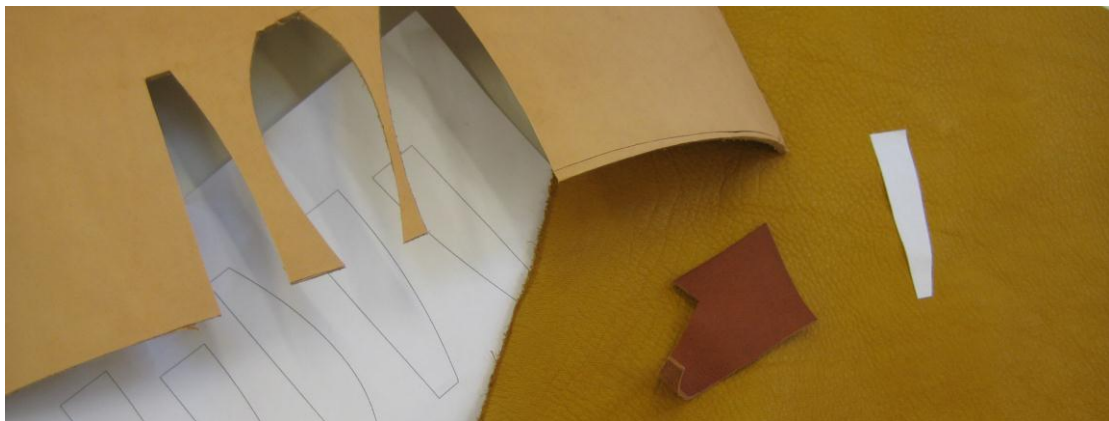


The result was not so satisfying so I kept the Faces in translucent material for the next stage.





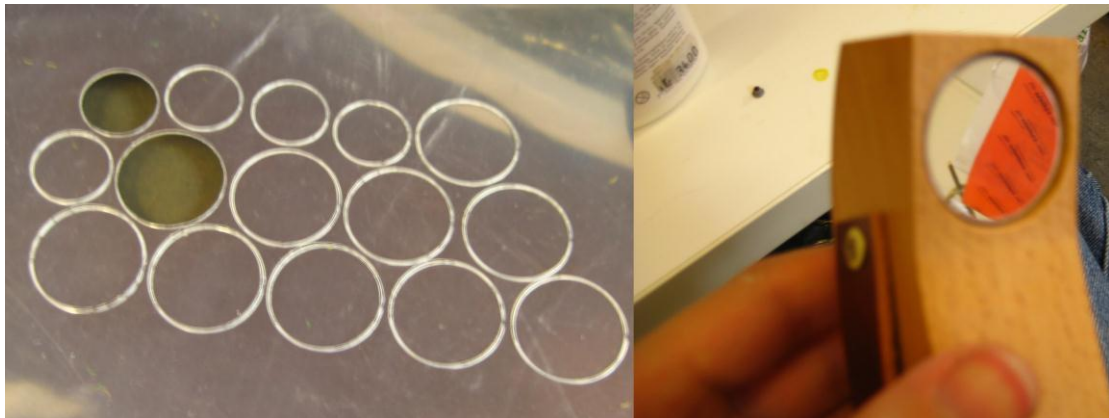
After several tutoring the shape of each character has been defined. Each wooden piece has been waxed carefully for several time to have a not so glaring shine on them. And also the fit of each face is tested. The pieces are made from walnut, ash, oak and beech. The reason for choosing these woods is simply because of their variation in colure tone and texture which will make each figurine unique as their own.



The next stage in the project was to define the shape of each arm. I went for a very minimalistic approach on designing the arms they more or less look like wings than arms that purely is an aesthetical decision. The minimal shape creates a very well balanced and harmonious flow with the body. Different colors leather has been chosen to fit with the wood color. This fit is mostly to create a subtle contrast with the character's body.



Fitting magnets inside the face cavity, this is an Idea that I developed after the midterm presentation, A tutor asked me what if someone will not have any feeling about the faces or the child will not connect with one of the characters as a member of the family. The magnet is the solution for this question, the faces are removable and it is easily possible to change them or leave them faceless.



To make even faceless family members enjoyable to play I add mirror behind the faces attached to the magnet. These thin foil mirrors are there to increase the play feature of the set .based on my previous works I noticed that Children love mirror play specifically with their parents or their friends and these small mirror will let them try to see themselves in it or play the light reflection game with each other.



Clear plastic of the faces created a problem especially when I try to fit the metal coin inside them, therefore I decided to color the back plate of the faces with subtle but in contrast with wood colors. The coin inside the face scratched the paint and created marks on the faces which I tried to fix this problem with several layer of paints and glue this is just good enough for a presentation and exhibition of course the production version will be much better in terms of durability.

Result



The result of this project satisfied me for two main reasons. One I succeed to communicate the characteristic of figures like the mood in a simple and understandable form without having pose-able arm and feet. That means as minimal as possible. Second I finally reach a level that both children and adult will be interested on playing or at least having them around to interact with. I will explain this matter in detail,



Children (child perspective)

Role-play is an important act of understanding the world and surrounding for children. It's a way to learn communication with surrounding and with parents or friends who are also active in the play. Role-play can serve as a purpose for allowing children to explore adult roles and relationships. It can allow a free interpretation of life and the world that is around them. Off course role-play are generally understood as children wearing costumes and pretending being someone else in this case children use figurines to play the mother or the child and the entire world is recreated in a smaller scale. Changing the faces allow the child to create his/her own character with a special mood. The mirror behind the face is an extra added play value to the set. Mirrors are best tools for exploration. With the small implemented mirrors children can explore the light reflection of the surrounding so the play aria grows to a bigger surrounding allowing the child to not focus just in a small playground. The different shapes of figurines also is a helping tool for children to learn about shapes and forms allowing them to improve their sense of tactility.

Adult (adult perspective)

These figurines can be used as a communication tool for parents who are in need to explain a complicated situation within the family to children. The figurines are not designed with having a therapeutic approach in mind but it can be used for this reason. Play is also part of adult world and often adult are in need to be engaged with children in a play activity to improve their communication skill with children or simply have fun therefor Designing toys that is attracting adults to play become the center of interest. Play grounds are located normally within child's environment and so play activity is limited to certain location in the house. By designing play figurines that are aesthetically pleasing and can be part of the leaving room set could bring the play activity with in adults leaving location. and this means a bigger area for play.



Reflection

This project has been a challenge for me to understand what actually I am able to do specially when there are various factors like children's safety and cost involved. I also wanted to step out of my norm and create something that is different than my previous works specifically in terms of part count. The styling was also a challenge. How to come up with a design styling that is part of my visual identity but it's very minimal in the same time pleasing to the eye of both children and adult audiences. I am pleased with the result and although I myself am critical toward the end quality I would say I reach all the requirements that I set from the beginning.

One of the critics I received from my opponent in the exam day was that all my creations and particularly this project is not reflecting my background and my culture of origin. My respond to this was that I came from different cultural background my mother from Algeria and my father being an Iranian I was raised in a multicultural family and even they were educated in different countries than their country of origin. Being multicultural is a plus and its part of my identity. Like many children of my generation who were born in countries different from their country of origin and from parents of multi ethnics I praise the colorful cultures in the world and I use them as a tool for creation but in my own simplistic way.

Other critic that I received was about the size of the figurines. As I mentioned earlier the size were chosen to fit the palm of a 4 year old child and therefor they are in the smaller size. Off course it would be more appealing to adults if they were at least 5 to 10 centimeter larger but that means adding more extra weight. As we know hard woods are heavy and that will risqué the child safety when handling them. I agree a separate line of figurines for specific adult users would be a solution and that would provide even a full size functional mirror on them so that your entire face would be visible on them.

At the day of exam I received a magazine from my opponent about the Japanese pop art scene and that came as a surprise to me because my creations are started with my enthusiasm toward Japanese figurines and pop culture and it kept growing over time. Knowing that the origin of this craft is Japan brings my curiosity to explore the scene of art and craft in Japan in the same time learn more about other cultures specifically the countries that I am based of. Children and adult will be the focus of my future works that's where my passion is. I will not separate them from each other.

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