

Man of Steel items sure to be super attractions

April 29, 2007

Later this summer, when the popular Comic-Con International convention again will be held in San Diego, you can bet that Superman-related items and memorabilia will be one of the major attractions.

That's not a hard call – he's a perennial favorite.

Superman is one of those unique characters that provides a common ground for collectors of all ages. Branded items run the gamut, and include patches, buttons, puzzles, clothing, games, utensils, toys, comic books and of course, lunch boxes and rings.

However, the action hero began as a weakling. The character emerged in the '30s as the brainchild of two teenage science fiction fans, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster. After being rejected by a number of newspaper syndicates, their Superman comic strip first debuted with the company that would later become DC Comics.

Its publisher, Harry Donenfeld, had contacted an editor at the McClure Syndicate for material to include in his new Action Comics series. The Superman strip was sent with other material and the Man of Steel became a reality.

Action Comics No. 1, which was distributed in June 1938, is the comic that collectors most desire. But even though the cover features Superman, only the last several pages are devoted to the superhero. Between 25 and 30 copies are known to exist in unrestored condition.

Once established, the comic led to the introduction of a Superman comic book in 1939, then to a weekly radio show, a cartoon series, and of course, the TV series, which starred George Reeves, and a more recent series: "Lois & Clark, The New Adventures of Superman," starring Dean Cain and Teri Hatcher.

But it was Reeves who set the standard. Born in Iowa in 1914, he was raised in Pasadena. He also played the part of Stuart Tarleton in the 1939 movie "Gone With The Wind."

Reeves was not a prolific signer of autographs. That, coupled with the fact that he died when he was 45, makes his signature difficult to obtain.

A real find, worth around \$7,000, would be a program for "Gone With The Wind" that contained autographs of stars Clark Gable, Vivien Leigh, Olivia de Havilland and Reeves.

TV's "Adventures of Superman" consisted of 104 episodes and aired from 1952-1958. But Reeves grew to resent the role, thinking he had become typecast. Depression set in because of his inability to obtain more movie offers, a fact explored in the 2006 film "Hollywoodland," featuring Ben Affleck.



MARIO TAMA / Getty Images
A Superman costume worn by the actor Christopher Reeve was sold at auction in 2001 before Reeve's death for approximately \$14,000.

Reeves' death on June 16, 1959, from a gunshot wound in his Beverly Hills home forever may remain a mystery. While ruled a suicide, others raise the possibility of murder by an associate of girlfriend Leonore Lemmon or former girlfriend Toni Mannix.

The late actor Christopher Reeve picked up the role, starring in the 1978 "Superman" movie as well as in sequels that followed in 1980, 1983 and 1987. "Superman Returns" starring Brandon Routh hit the silver screen last year.

For the collector, the Super Museum in Metropolis, Ill., is the place to survey the vast array of Superman items. Owner Jim Hambrick maintains a personal collection of memorabilia numbering more than 100,000 items).

For information about collecting some of the more common and affordable Superman items, you should view the Warner Bros. Shop Web site (www.wbshop.com) or www.johnstoys.com.

For the serious collector, an unrestored Action Comics No. 1 will easily cost \$100,000 (depending on condition); a Superman Lunchbox, by Universal, will set you back about \$15,000; and a 1978 Superman Record Player, about \$300. Also valuable are Superman premium rings and Superman of America Club Action Comics patches.

One thing about the long run of Superman collecting: It doesn't take a leap of faith, or over a tall building, to know that today's collectibles are tomorrow's treasures.

More information:

Comic-Con convention: www.comic-con.org/

Super Museum: www.supermuseum.com

Warner Bros. Shop: www.wbshop.com