

Carousel International Corp. (United States)
Rocket Ride, ca. 1950s
Painted metal, plywood, rubber
Collection of the Strong Museum, 93.1091

This coin-operated ride would have likely been located outside a department store or other shopping area. When activated, the rocket would have moved in a circular fashion, going backward and forward as well as up and down.

Outer Space and the Western Frontier

In American science fiction, outer space is often portrayed as a cosmic Wild West. Rockets and ray guns replace bucking broncos and rifles, while heroic adventurers battle aliens instead of lawless desperadoes.

The similarities between outer space and the mythic West highlight the significance of the western frontier to the mid-20th-century imagination. At this time, many Americans believed that the Western frontier had enabled the development of a national identity distinguished by ingenuity and self-sufficiency, though this thesis has since been contested and revised. By paralleling the unknowns of deep space with the perception of an unexplored western frontier, science fiction writers and filmmakers assured their work's popularity with many American audiences, but they also encouraged a sense of urgency in pursuit of space exploration. If the cosmos were the last great wilderness, some argued, then Americans, as the inheritors of the legendary frontier, should be the ones to explore it.

Masudaya (Japan)
Mars Rocket, ca. 1950
Lithographed tinplate, plastic, rubber
Collection of the Strong Museum, 101.39

This toy reflects the influence of jet fighters and other aircraft. Considered the embodiment of speed and efficiency, jet fighters greatly impacted 1950s aesthetics, inspiring developments such as the automobile tailfin.

Louis Marx and Company (United States)
Buck Rogers Spaceship, 1934
Pressed and lithographed tin plate
Collection of the Strong Museum, 79.381

Bright, colorful patterns and elaborate wings distinguish this spaceship, underscoring the fanciful character of early space toys.

Louis Marx and Company (United States)

Flash Gordon Rocket Fighter, 1939
Lithographed tinplate
Collection of the Strong Museum, 110.11873

Tigrett Industries (United States)
Golden Sonic, ca. 1957
Plastic
Private Collection

Daisy Manufacturing (United States)
Buck Rogers U-235 Disintegrator Pistol, ca. 1946
Copperplate, metal
Private Collection

Louis Marx and Company (United States)
Tom Corbett Space Cadet Space Gun, ca.1952
Lithographed tinplate, plastic
Private Collection

Louis Marx and Company (United States)
Rex Mars Space Target Game, ca. 1950
Lithographed tinplate, plastic
Collection of the Strong Museum, 101.140

Monogram Pictures (United States)
Flight to Mars, 1951
Private Collection

In *Flight to Mars*, a team of space explorers discovers a highly advanced civilization on Mars, only to learn that the Martians plan to invade Earth to replenish their diminishing resources. The film is loosely based on *Aelita*, a 1924 Russian constructivist film that depicted an advanced but decadent Martian society. Given the Cold War tensions that were prevalent in the early 1950s, the decision to reference a Russian work in an American film remains an unusual one.

This lobby card depicts the moment when the explorers first encounter the Martians. Though the Martians have a completely anthropomorphic appearance, this image conveys a sense of mystery about the aliens by showing them with their backs to the viewer, concealing their faces.

M.G.M. (United States)
The Mysterians, 1959
Private Collection

The Mysterians is a Japanese science-fiction film concerning Earth's invasion by a group of advanced humanoid beings from the planet Mysteroid. After being refused the right to marry human women and settle on Earth, the Mysterians attack the planet. Humanity must then unite to defeat the invaders. Originally released in Japan in 1957, the film was released two years later in the United States.

Buck Rogers and Flash Gordon

Science fiction abounds with adventurous heroes, but two of the earliest and most influential are Buck Rogers and Flash Gordon. Buck Rogers debuted in 1928 in *Amazing Stories*, the first literary magazine dedicated exclusively to science fiction. A veteran World War I pilot who remains in suspended animation for five centuries after a mining accident, Rogers becomes a freedom fighter in the 25th century, combating despotic forces with ray guns, spaceships, and other futuristic gadgets. Flash Gordon premiered a few years later, in 1934, as a newspaper comic strip. A Yale graduate and polo player, Gordon travels by rocketship to the mysterious planet Mongo, where he fights monsters, tyrannical emperors, and other colorful characters.

The cosmic adventures of Buck Rogers and Flash Gordon provided an escape from the bleak realities of the Great Depression, and both characters continued to appear in a range of media over the following decades, including comics, films, and television. Buck Rogers in particular inspired a commercial revolution, with an array of toys and games marketed around the character.

Maker Unknown

Buck Rogers Boots, 1935

Rubber

Collection of the Strong Museum, 101.72

Maker Unknown

Buck Rogers Helmet, 1935

Leather, metal, plastic

Collection of the Strong Museum, 101.73

Milton Bradley Company, United States

Buck Rogers Jigsaw Puzzle, 1952

Ink, paper, cardboard

Private Collection

Milton Bradley Company, United States

Flash Gordon Jigsaw Puzzle, 1951

Ink, paper, cardboard

Private Collection

Big Little Books, Whitman Publishing Company (United States)

Flash Gordon in the Waterworld of Mongo, 1937

Ink, Paper, cardboard
Private Collection

Big Little Books, Whitman Publishing Company (United States)

Flash Gordon in the Iceworld of Mongo, 1942

Ink, Paper, cardboard
Private Collection

Flash Gordon started his fantastical adventures in the Sunday comics, where artist Alex Raymond drew lush illustrations of Mongo and other exotic worlds. Big Little Books reprinted popular comics such as Flash Gordon in these small, thick volumes.

Space Travel in Popular Culture

The exploits of Buck Rogers and Flash Gordon may have entertained the American public, but convincing that same audience of space travel's feasibility proved more challenging. Most Americans in the 1930s considered space travel impossible. While some scientists, most notably Robert H. Goddard, were launching rockets, these were not ready for use on rocket ships for manned space travel.

After World War II, American rocketry received a boon when Germany's top rocket scientists received asylum in the United States, but equally important was the economic prosperity that occurred following the war. As more Americans experienced greater affluence and became increasingly optimistic about the future, the thought of reaching out to new worlds seemed less implausible. To encourage this growing support of space exploration, scientists published articles in magazines such as *Collier's*, and appeared in television, and other popular media to advocate the attainability of space travel. The idea of extraterrestrial exploration then became deeply embedded in popular culture, inspiring movies, television shows, home décor, and toys.

Saalsfield Publishing

Tom Corbett, Space Cadet Picture Puzzles, 1952

Ink, paper, cardboard
Private Collection

Saalsfield Publishing

Tom Corbett, Space Cadet Jigsaw Puzzle, 1952

Ink, paper, cardboard
Private Collection

Tom Corbett was one of the most popular space-age characters of the 1950s, appearing in books, radio, comics, and television. Corbett and his cohorts were students at the Space Academy, a 24th-century version of West Point, where they trained to become members of the prestigious Solar Guard.

Unlike most sci-fi protagonists, who were mature adults, Corbett and his companions were portrayed as adolescents, making them especially popular with younger audiences. Like the more recent Harry Potter series, the Tom Corbett franchise explored the challenges of teenage life in an extraordinary setting, in this instance the futuristic space age.

Jaymar Specialty Co., New York (United States)
Rex Mars, Space Patrol Jigsaw Puzzle, ca. 1952
Ink, paper, cardboard
Private Collection

Louis Marx and Company (United States)
Rex Mars Planet Patrol Set No. 7014, 1950-1960
Lithographed tinfoil, rubber, plastic
Collection of the Strong Museum, 100.315

Outer space meets the western frontier in this elaborate, brightly-colored Rex Mars playset, reaffirming the similarities between the two realms in mid-20th century popular culture. Louis Marx and Company used the same basic design for all its themed playsets, from cowboys-and-Indians to battlefields to outer-space adventures.

Unlike Tom Corbett or Captain Video, Rex Mars was not a television character but a space-age mascot created by Louis Marx and Company to avoid the royalties associated with using licensed characters for toys.

Parker Brothers (United States)
Walt Disney's Tomorrowland Rocket to the Moon, 1956
Wood, metal, printed paper
Collection of Strong Museum, 93.1497

Walt Disney was one of space travel's strongest advocates, and he used his influence as an entrepreneur, filmmaker, and celebrity to market its desirability to the American public. Between 1955 and 1957, Disney collaborated with prominent scientists such as Wernher von Braun to produce a series of popular television specials addressing space exploration.

Disney also promoted his futurist vision through his theme park, Disneyland. Opened in 1955, Disneyland featured five "themed" areas, including Tomorrowland, which presented a futuristic landscape populated with rocket ships and flying saucers. Disney promoted the park through advertisements, television specials, and games such as this one.

Parker Brothers (United States)
Orbit: Parker Brothers Space Game, ca. 1959
Printed paper, cardboard, wood
Collection of the Strong Museum, 107.1299

Maker Unknown
Space Blanket, 1950-1955
Cotton
Collection of the Strong Museum, 92.1315

Milton Bradley Company (United States)
Captain Video: An Exciting Space Game, 1952
Printed paper, painted wood, metal
Collection of the Strong Museum, 92.722

Captain Video and His Video Rangers was the first science-fiction series to air on American television. Broadcast from 1949 to 1955, the series followed the adventures of Captain Video and his space-age explorers while touting popular American ideals such as individual liberty, reflecting Cold War tensions prevalent at the time. While considered low-tech by today's standards, *Captain Video* proved immensely popular and influential, inspiring subsequent science-fiction television shows.

Sputnik and the Space Race

On October 4, 1957, America's worldview changed radically when the USSR launched *Sputnik 1*, the first man-made object to orbit the Earth. Other feats of Soviet space technology quickly followed. *Sputnik 2*, the first satellite to contain a live animal, was launched on November 3, 1957. In September 1959, *Luna 2* became the first manmade object to land on the Moon, and cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin became the first human to orbit the Earth in April 1961.

It is difficult to overestimate the impact of *Sputnik* on the United States. The satellite renewed fears about a Soviet nuclear attack, but it also proved a critical motivator for American space technology. Urged on by Cold War paranoia and national pride, the United States soon entered the Space Race, launching an effort that would culminate in the Apollo lunar landings.

U.S.S.R.
Poster to the People of Radyansky, ca. 1959
Private Collection

The common worker becomes the conqueror of space in this poster, as a laborer reaches up to plant a Soviet flag on the moon. The flag, which bears the date September 1959, commemorates the landing of Luna 2. The poster addresses the people of Radyansky, which is located in Ukraine, and the text approximately translates to "The more we see, the stronger we will be."

U.S.S.R.
Sputnik Music Box, ca. 1958
Plastic, Metal
Private Collection

In Russian, *Sputnik* means “traveling companion of the Earth.” Weighing 184 pounds and fueled by kerosene, the beachball-sized *Sputnik 1* seemed an unlikely harbinger of the Space Age. Yet the satellite became an international sensation, winning the admiration of Europe and the envy and fear of America.

This music box was produced in the Soviet Union and sold as a souvenir at the 1958 World’s Fair in Brussels, Belgium. When fully wound, it plays a song called “The Internationale,” a late 19th-century French song traditionally affiliated with socialist organizations. It became the official song of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Following this melody, a soft pinging resembling *Sputnik*’s beeping is heard, reminding the listener of the satellite’s achievement.

U.S.S.R.
Commemorative Gagarin Vostock Nightlamp, 1960s
Plastic
Private Collection

The Soviet Union shocked the United States again on April 12, 1961, when cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin orbited the Earth. The USSR honored Gagarin’s historic flight by producing commemorative lamps such as this one. The pedestal depicts crucial moments from Soviet history and culture, linking the flight to the legacy of the Soviet Union.

Maker Unknown (Argentina)
Lanza Cohetes Sputnik (Rocket Launcher Sputnik), 1950s-1960s
Lithographed tinplate
Private Collection

As *Sputnik* became an international sensation, different toys inspired by the satellite appeared, though some examples only referenced it loosely. This toy is called *Sputnik*, but it more closely resembles a missile than the famed satellite. Lithographed images of soldiers around the cylinders underscore the object’s militaristic character.

U.S.S.R.
Rocket, 1950s-1960s
Lithographed tinplate, plastic
Private Collection

U.S.S.R.
Rocket Poster, ca. 1987
Private Collection

The relationship between the creation of the USSR and the pioneering of space are underscored in this poster, with the date 1917 appearing directly underneath the launching rocket. The text approximates to “We are the first to traverse the new world.”

Maker unknown (Japan)
Space Age Tricycle, ca. 1960
Metal, steel, chrome
Collection of the Strong Museum, 108.649

Though made in Japan, this tricycle, with its distinctive round forms, reflects Sputnik’s influence not only in terms of technology, but in space-age aesthetics as well.

The Reaction to Sputnik

Embarrassed by its delayed entry into the Space Race, the United States embarked on an aggressive space program to reaffirm its international prestige and self-confidence. NASA, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, was established in 1958, and the first American satellites were launched that same year. In July 1969, Americans landed on the Moon.

The Space Race also impacted the design of space-related toys. Whereas the rocket ships of Flash Gordon and Buck Rogers were largely fanciful creations, the toys of the late 1950s and 1960s reflected contemporary developments in rocketry and space travel, becoming more realistic in design. Yet the events associated with these toys continued to underscore human imagination and ingenuity. The exploits of Buck Rogers were fictional adventures set in a far-distant future, but the efforts of NASA were actual events occurring in the here and now.

Yonezawa, Japan
Fly to the Moon by Space Capsule, 1960s
Plastic
Private Collection

T. Nomura, Japan
Moon Patrol, ca. 1958
Lithographed tinfoil, plastic
Private Collection

Yonezawa, Japan
S-2 Man Made Satellite, ca. 1955-1957
Lithographed tinfoil
Private Collection

Nomura, Japan

Super Space Patrol US Navy Tank, ca. 1962
Lithographed tinplate, plastic
Private Collection

Scientific Products Company (United States)
Lunar-1 Two Stage Moon Rocket, 1960-1970
Ink, paper, cardboard, plastic
Collection of the Strong Museum, 106.134

Louis Marx and Company (United States)
Cape Canaveral Play Set, 1960
Lithographed tin, plastic
Collection of the Strong Museum, 92.1414

In contrast to the Rex Mars playset, which offers a generic setting inspired by the Western frontier, this Cape Canaveral set depicts an actual, contemporary place. Rockets and armed soldiers underscore both current technological developments and the close relationship between space exploration and the military during the Space Race.

Horikawa (Japan)
Space Station, ca. 1959
Plastic
Private Collection

As rocketry improved, the idea of humans eventually living in space excited the public imagination. This toy reflects the designs of science writer Willy Ley and rocket scientist Wernher von Braun, who both favored rotating, circular stations that could produce gravity artificially. The toy also features separate chambers for dining and recreation, offering a comfortable vision of life in outer space.

The reality of space-station life, by contrast, has often been less glamorous, as is demonstrated in *A House in Space* by Henry S.F. Cooper. This book describes the recollections of astronauts aboard Skylab, a temporary space station built during the 1970s to study the effects of weightlessness on the human body. Eating proved especially challenging, as the food packets were “apt to explode and burst the food all over...spattering the walls, the windows, the grid ceiling, and even getting beneath the grid floor.”

Transogram Company, Inc.
My Favorite Martian Game, 1963
Cardboard, Bristol board, metal, dice
Collection of the Strong Museum, 101.185

The television show *My Favorite Martian* took a different approach to the outer-space genre by considering life on Earth from an alien’s perspective. After crashing his spaceship on Earth, a Martian scientist takes up residence with a human named Tim O’

Hara, posing as his uncle Martin while repairing the broken ship. The series follows Martin's efforts to conform to human life while concealing his Martian characteristics, with only O'Hara knowing the extent of his capabilities.

Intelligent and genial, the benevolent Martin contrasted with popular conceptions of aliens as aggressive and invasive, setting a precedent for tolerance that would be addressed in other series such as *Star Trek*.

AMT Corporation (United States)
U.S.S. Enterprise Space Ship Model Kit, 1970-1975
Printed paper, plastic
Collection of the Strong Museum, 93.990

Mego Corp. (Hong Kong)
Captain Kirk, 1974
Vinyl, cotton fabric, molded plastic
Collection of the Strong Museum, 104.1306

Like many science-fiction series, *Star Trek* presented a technologically advanced future, where humans inhabited self-sufficient spaceships capable of exceeding the speed of light. The show's primary focus, however, was humanity's interaction with extraterrestrials and the tensions that can arise when unfamiliar cultures or species confront one another. A vehicle for social commentary, *Star Trek* used its futuristic setting and alien creatures to explore contemporary social issues such as civil rights and the Vietnam War.

From Buck Rogers to Apollo Astronauts

Though many scientists advocated that robots were more efficient than humans for space exploration, manned space travel received the most attention and funding from the American public. Much of its appeal stemmed from the image of the astronaut, whose seemingly solitary, heroic character channeled popular American heroes and archetypes. Like Buck Rogers and Flash Gordon before them, astronauts embodied many mid-20th-century American values, combining the pioneering spirit of the past with the objective reality of modern science.

While robots may have been better suited physically to withstand space travel, the scientific feats that the astronauts managed to accomplish remain impressive. From Apollo's inception in 1961 to its final assignment in 1972, U.S. astronauts visited the Moon six times, taking photographs, collecting lunar samples, and conducting tests that would help scientists gain a deeper understanding of both the Moon and the solar system. The technological developments made during the course of the program helped produce various new products, from fireproof bedding to advanced computer technology. Apollo

also helped instigate a greater ecological awareness in American society, as photographs of Earth taken by the astronauts introduced the public to images of a unique yet fragile planet.

Ideal Toy Corporation (United States)
Ed McCauley Space Helmet, 1960
Molded Plastic
Collection of the Strong Museum, 105.963

This helmet was inspired by one worn by Colonel Edward McCauley, the protagonist on the television series *Men Into Space*, which ran from 1959 to 1960.

Compared to the more fanciful exploits of Buck Rogers or Flash Gordon, *Men Into Space* concentrated on the practical difficulties of space exploration, addressing issues such as faulty equipment and budgetary restrictions. Set during the late 20th century, the show paralleled contemporary developments in space travel, reflecting its increasing feasibility as a scientific and exploratory endeavor.

Daishin Kogyo (Japan)
Apollo 11 Eagle Lunar Module, ca. 1969
Tinplate, Plastic
Private Collection

In July, 1969, NASA's ambitions for a manned lunar landing became reality when the Apollo 11 Eagle Lunar Module touched down on the Moon. An international sensation, the Apollo mission would inspire toys such as this one.

Cragston-Daiya (Japan)
Astronaut, ca. 1962
Lithographed tinplate
Private Collection

Daiya (Japan)
Astronaut, ca. 1963
Lithographed tinplate
Private Collection

Hasbro Industries, Inc. (Japan)
G.I. Joe Official Space Capsule and Space Suit, 1966
Molded plastic, vinyl, fabric, cardboard
Collection of the Strong Museum, 105.47

Milton Bradley (United States)
Astronauts of Apollo 11—First on the Moon Jigsaw Puzzle, 1969

Ink, paper, cardboard
Private Collection

Astronauts were crucial to maintaining space exploration's popularity with the public. They gave organizations such as NASA a human face, and became diplomats for America on international tours.