



Velocipede, 1855-1865

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United States
Wood, paint, metal
101303



HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Popular during the mid-19th century, the velocipede was one of the earliest forms of bicycles. As it evolved, the velocipede took on different designs. For example, there existed velocipedes with two wheels, the seat perched high atop the front wheel with a much smaller one behind; another velocipede was propelled forward by the rider by cranking handles attached to the front wheels. By the late 19th century, however, the two-wheel design of the bicycle that we still use today became popular, as better engineering and cheaper materials developed.

Velocipedes – and, later, bicycles – were used for both transportation and leisure. At a time when horses were the only transportation options, bicycles offered people an inexpensive option for speed and mobility. In effect, bicycles produced social change, offering both physical and social mobility for children, men, and women alike.

ART HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The sculptural forms, bright colors, and construction or finishing techniques have elevated many American toys to works of art. A precursor to the bicycle, this velocipede features fanciful graining, striping, and floral ornaments painted by an artist employed by the toy's manufacturer.¹

SAMPLE GUIDING QUESTIONS

- Describe the form and decoration of this object.
- How would a child ride this velocipede? For what age child would this have been made?
- Is this meant to be a toy or a form of transportation? Why do you think so?
- The word “velocipede” comes from *pede*, which means “foot” in Latin, and *veloci*, which means quick. Does the translation make sense? Why or why not?
- How do you think this velocipede was made? Do you think all parts were made by a master craftsman in his own little shop? Or do you think this is an industrialized product? Why?

SUGGESTED LEARNING ACTIVITIES

Look at representations of the velocipede/bicycle craze in the 19th century (some examples are: “Velocipede Mania” by Thomas Worth, and “New York and Coney Island Cycle March Two-Step” poster; found at: http://americanhistory.si.edu/onthemove/collection/object_1169.html). What kinds of social changes did bicycles bring? Why were people so excited about velocipedes and bicycles? Discuss the concept of “America on the Move” at the turn of the 20th century. What kinds of social and industrial implications did these new forms of transportation create?

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¹ Quoted from ARTscape. Peabody Essex Museum. Online at: <http://www.pem.org> [viewed 1 November 2006].