

## A Cub of Titanic Proportions: Steiff's Original 1912 Black Mohair Titanic Mourning Bears

By Rebekah Kaufman

If you were to ask vintage Steiff or Teddy enthusiasts what tops their wish lists, many would say a Steiff 1912 black mohair "Titanic Mourning" bear. These extraordinary cubs are famous for their looks, rarity, and place in history and always grab the collecting world's attention when they come up for sale—once in a blue moon. In July 2023, arguably the finest example extant headlined Ladenburger Spielzeugauktion GmbH's Special Steiff Auction held in Giengen, Germany. This bear was owned by Susan Kilgore Wiley (1941-2022) of Raleigh, North Carolina and was named Othello. Othello was the pride and joy of her extensive vintage Steiff collection. As a result of this auction, Othello would go on to win hearts, headlines, and a new world's record for the most expensive antique Teddy bear ever sold at auction. Here is the story behind this amazing treasure and family heirloom, and what made him exceptional from so many perspectives.

Othello, who was "born" in 1912, was the complete package. He was uniquely handsome, was in all original condition, and had an irresistible personality. He measured 50 cm tall standing, was five ways jointed, and solidly stuffed with wood wool. He was made from pitch black mohair and had tan felt paw pads. He came to life with black wooden shoe button eyes backed in red felt circles, a hand embroidered black nose and mouth, black embroidered claws, a center seam head construction, and a lightly shaved muzzle. He was in outstanding condition with extremely minor age related losses and a possible, tiny professional repair to one of his felt footpads. He retained his small trailing "f" button as his Steiff ID.

Mrs. Wiley adored Othello before actually laying eyes on him in person, and knew that she had to have him as part of her hug. She travelled to London from the United States with her sister Mimi to attend an auction at Sotheby's on May 18th, 1990 where this bear was on offer. According to the Wiley family, Mrs. Wiley was determined to get Othello at whatever cost. She ended up winning a bidding war with a phone bidder, got him for around \$40,000, and set a Sotheby's sales record at the time. After paying for and collecting him, Mrs. Wiley brought Othello to her London hotel room. That night, there was a fire alarm, and all the guests had to leave the building. Of course, Mrs. Wiley had Othello securely under her arm as she made her escape. This was one of Mrs. Wiley's favorite collecting stories of all time.

In the broadest sense, there are two main conventional reasons why Steiff's black mohair "Titanic Mourning" bears



Mrs. Wiley's daughter Bettie Olson and Othello at the Ladenburger Spielzeugauktion auction preview event held at the Steiff museum. Image from the author's collection.



**Left:** Mrs. Wiley holding Othello at a 1990s era Steiff event. Image from the Wiley family.



**Right:** Dr. Beatrice Steiff, a member of the Steiff family, at Othello's auction preview event held at the Steiff museum. Image from Margarete Steiff GmbH and the Steiff Museum Facebook page.

are so desirable amongst collectors. They are history and rarity. In terms of history, these "crying" cubs are tied to one of the most significant worldwide, and still relevant events of the 20th century, the sinking of the Titanic in 1912. When the Titanic disaster struck, nearly everyone in England was personally touched by this event, or had a family member or colleague who was. The whole country was in shock, much like America was after the 9/11 disaster. In response, Steiff produced a handful of all black mohair bears with red felt behind their eyes—to indicate sadness and crying—for the English market. And in

*Continued on page 16*

# Auction News - Titanic Bear *(Continued from page 14)*



**Left:** The greater Wiley family and members of the Ladenburger Spielzeugauktion and Steiff teams, at Othello's auction preview event held at the Steiff museum. Image from Margarete Steiff GmbH and the Steiff Museum Facebook page.

**Below left:** Othello, as pictured in the Ladenburger Spielzeugauktion July 1st, 2023 Special Steiff Auction catalog. Image from Ladenburger Spielzeugauktion.

**Below right:** Othello, as pictured in the Ladenburger Spielzeugauktion July 1st, 2023 Special Steiff Auction catalog. Image from Ladenburger Spielzeugauktion.

terms of rarity, so few examples were made, and so few remain today, that the demand for them so completely overwhelms the supply. As usual, everyone wants what is just out of reach. Although numbers vary a bit from reference to reference, it is best estimated that Steiff produced no more than 600-700 of these all-black mohair bears with red felt backed eyes in total overall.

But Mrs. Wiley's Titanic bear had two additional, unexpected features which really added an additional degree of magnitude to its appeal—and price tag. The first one was simply coincidence. This Titanic bear went up for sale when the world's attention was again focused on the Titanic. Here we speak of the Titanic Submersible Expedition explosion disaster in June 2023, which cost five lives. The second had to do with a very subtle design detail. Mrs. Wiley's bear featured the company's coveted and extremely rare "center seam" facial construction. In the early 1900s, every seventh bear that Steiff made had a seam down the center of its face to make the most efficient use of the mohair fabric used to create them. The dimensions of the fabric supplied at the time were such that the Steiff could manufacture six full heads from it, but there always was some remaining material from this cutting process. As such, Steiff found a way to "patch" these leftovers into another head and therefore not waste any fabric. Othello was the first center seamed black mohair Titanic Mourning bear in memory—perhaps even ever—to come to public auction, as far as anyone could tell.

Only a handful of Steiff black mohair Titanic bears have come up for sale this century. Most have realized in the c. \$20,000-40,000 range. When Othello and his auction were publicized, and became the talk of the collecting community, many in the know



thought he may break the six-figure mark. However, this once-in-a-lifetime example would go on to hammer at 180,000 euro or \$202,020, and realize \$250,505. The most expensive antique Teddy bear to trade hands to date, according to online sources, was a Steiff bear owned by Colonel Bob Henderson named Teddy Girl. She was sold in London by Christie's for £110,000 or \$171,600 on December 5th, 1994. However, Mrs. Wiley's Teddy bear sold for over a quarter million dollars—breaking this previous high mark by over \$78,000.

*Antique DOLL Collector* had the opportunity to speak with

*Continued on page 18*





Author Rebekah Kaufman and Auctioneer Pia Fast Seidel relaxing at the auction house after a successful auction event. Image from the author's collection.

Pia Fast Seidel of Ladenburger Spielzeugauktion. She was the auctioneer at the podium when Othello sold. Here is what she said about this remarkable bear and what it was like auctioning him off in front of a worldwide audience. She explains,

"Our auction house has been in business for 34 years and we have only sold a few antique Steiff black bears over that time frame; they are that incredibly rare. Most of them have been in loved to worn out condition at best. Mrs. Wiley's Othello bear was an absolute exception. When I first saw him, I didn't think he was old. He was in such perfect condition, with a center seam head construction. It was difficult to believe that he was actually over a century old, and not a replica. However, I quickly realized how special he was.

"I am very grateful that I had the experience of selling this bear; it will always be a career highlight! In general, I'm usually pretty calm before taking the podium. I rarely get rattled. This time it was a little different. During this premier sale, I had not only Othello to sell, but many other fine Steiff items that could also trade hands at six figures. Othello was lot #82, and when it was finally time to sell him, I started to get some palpitations. I knew that five phone bidders would be competing for him, but I also knew that some bidders were also live in the room.

"Our auction house expected that Othello may hammer for about 80,000 to 100,000 euros. But the bidding quickly escalated. When he hit 100,000 euro I realized history was in the making. I was completely fixated on the telephone bids that I almost overlooked the final bid, which came from the floor. What a surprise that was! When the bidding was finally over, I was overcome with joy. I was so proud of the results, our company, and our team who made everything possible."

And finally, can you imagine what it would feel like to personally watch a treasured family heirloom being auctioned off in front of an eager and excited worldwide audience? *Antique DOLL Collector* also spoke to Bettie Olson, Mrs. Wiley's daughter, who watched the sale live in Germany with several other family members. She shares,

"The auction was a surreal experience and I am so grateful

for the opportunity to have been there. Never in my wildest imagination would I ever thought I would visit Giengen—a place that my mother loved and visited many times—and watch her beloved collection find new homes. This was the first live auction I had ever experienced, and I am not a collector. So all of this was very new to me. It was so special meeting people who had known my mother and that I recognized from either hearing about them or reading about them in her correspondence with Steiff over the years.

"Seeing how excited Othello's new owner was with him on auction day was incredibly heartwarming. In her, I could see my mother and what it would have been like to be at a live sale with her. I think my mother would be overjoyed in many ways that her beloved Othello caught the attention of the world and set a new world's record for the most expensive antique bear ever sold at auction. I can hear her say, 'I told you so!' She would also be delighted that we got to experience the joy that she had as a collector and that the family benefited from the sale because she loved us and would have wanted that. But I think she'd be most grateful that her beloved items were now in the hands of collectors like herself who will appreciate and enjoy them as she did. So the circle is complete and it could not have been a better experience."



Othello on the cover of his July, 2023 sale. Image from Ladenburger Spielzeugauktion.