

Buried Treasure

by Rob Kelly



[Editor's note: Writer/artist/historian Rob Kelly (whose bio is on view with this issue's Aquaman Merchandise article) loves DC Comics' SAG (Skeates/Aparo/Giordano) Aquaman, and has something he'd like to get off his chest...]

In the days before comic-book specialty shops dotted the suburban landscape, comics fans' exposure to stories from older books were limited to when publishers reprinted classic material in assorted 100-page giants, treasury editions, devoted reprint titles like *Marvel Tales*, and digests.

Case in point: When I was checking out the comics selection at the Voorhees News & Tobacco Shop in June 1982 (thanks for the allowance money, Dad), I saw that DC's venerable *Adventure Comics* series—which previously had featured a new version of the “Dial H For Hero” characters—was now in a digest format. The front cover looked interesting enough (not a big Legion fan, but Captain Marvel is always cool!), but it was the back cover that sold me: The Spectre! Black Canary! Sandman! And... *Aquaman!*

Ever since I turned the TV on as a toddler and saw a little show called *Super Friends*, Aquaman was, and always has been, my favorite character. One look inside the comic (issue #491) showed me that this was an Aquaman adventure I had never read before. The story, “Sorcerers of the Sea,” was by three names I was very familiar with, and a fan of: Steve Skeates (writer), Jim Aparo (artist), and Dick Giordano (editor). The book was immediately added to the pile, even though, at 95 cents, it cost more than most of the other comics I was buying.

I went home that night and read the whole book in one go. As soon as I read the Aquaman story, I loved it immediately, and over the next year I made sure to never miss an issue of *Adventure Comics* (which wasn't easy since the digests didn't show up in all that many newsstands, and sometimes it was a real hunt). Between issues #491 and 503 (except #500, which was an all-Legion issue), the digests presented a quick-moving, serialized adventure that had Aquaman on a desperate hunt to find a missing (and, unbeknownst to the Sea King, kidnapped) Mera. As he scours the Seven Seas, he battles Black Manta, runs afoul of a gang of surface-world mobsters, meets a world of giants, and visits a surrealistic alternate dimension seemingly not bound by the rules of time and space, all the while fighting off a palace coup back in Atlantis. Skeates' story delivers high adventure, thrills, complex characterization, and great humor, and it immediately rocketed to the list of some of my favorite Aquaman comics of all time. The artwork is by the legendary Jim Aparo—at the top of his game—and, unlike a lot of other artists whose work suffers when reprinted in digest form, Aparo's thick ink line and crisp, clear layouts worked just as well at the smaller size. The only indication of the delights that laid within these issues of *Adventure* were the tiny slivers of back-cover real estate DC saw fit to give the Sea King alongside a brief headline describing the story.

I had never seen this particular series of stories before, had no idea it existed, and yet here it was tucked away in the back pages of a digest, which never got any advertising love from DC—you just sort of saw these things show up on the newsstand, without fanfare (and once you missed an issue, it was presumably gone forever). *Adventure Comics* was cancelled a year later with #503, leaving the Aquaman story woefully incomplete. Not too long after, I discovered comics shops and the whole notion of “back issues,” and made an effort to find these older *Aquaman* comics, dying to see how it all wrapped up. One by one, I found all the issues I needed (out of order, of course), and over the decades when I would go back to re-read old *Aquaman* comics, I always revisited this series of issues as one complete story. Both Skeates and Aparo would return to the character, but never together, making *Aquaman* #40–56 a, er, high-water mark in the history of the character.

Time wore on, of course, and older comics started getting reprinted in increasingly deluxe and trade paperback formats. As Aquaman began to get trade collections all to himself, I figured this SAG (Skeates/Aparo/Giordano) run of *Aquaman* would be at the top of the list, because it was so obviously great. So I waited.

And waited. And waited.

35 years later, I'm still waiting. For some reason, DC Comics has still never seen fit to collect these 16 issues between two covers, even though it would only take one or two books to do it. When DC gave Aquaman his own *Showcase* series of phone book-thick B&W trades in the late 2000s, I knew it wouldn't be long before they got to *Aquaman* #40–56. Of course—and I think you can see where this is going—DC stopped doing the *Showcase: Aquaman* series with volume 3, which ends at *Aquaman* #39! Sufferin' swordfish!

With the *Aquaman* movie about to hit theaters, DC is unearthing all the Aquaman comics they can find and reprinting them. As of this writing, the classic SAG run still remains buried treasure, collected only once, incomplete and unceremoniously on grubby, half-sized newsprint. I guess if I want wax nostalgic, I could say it was fitting that some of Aquaman's best stories appeared in the final year of *Adventure Comics*, since he had so many good runs in that title—many of which have been reprinted. Hint, hint, DC!

Extra! Extra! Not long after writing this piece and submitting it to *BACK ISSUE*, DC announced it will be releasing *Aquaman: The Search for Mera Deluxe Edition*, a hardcover which will collect *Aquaman* #40–48, encompassing the complete multi-part storyline. While that still leaves some of the finest SAG stories untouched (“Is California Sinking?,” “The Creature That Devoured Detroit,” among others), it's great that newer readers will finally have easy access to some of the finest Aquaman adventures ever put to paper. *Aquaman: The Search for Mera Deluxe Edition* should be available on December 4, 2018.



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THE TOY BOX

Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman didn't have to wait very long after their comic-book debuts before appearing on licensed merchandise. While crude to our modern eyes, these initial offerings showed that these characters were so massively popular that they could not be contained in the pages of a four-color comic book.

Their future Super Friend, Aquaman, was not so lucky. Relegated to the back pages of *More Fun Comics* and (later) *Adventure Comics* throughout the 1940s and '50s, there was a drought (I apologize in advance for all the water puns) of Sea King merchandise that lasted all the way until 1966, a full quarter-century after his debut in 1941. Along with Superman and Batman, Aquaman was part of Ideal Toys' Captain Action line, where kids could dress up the good Captain as Aquaman and have adventures alongside his sidekick Action Boy (who came along in 1967), who you could dress up as Aqualad. Both sets came up with multiple accessories (a trident, a knife, flippers, etc.), most of which most kids probably lost 15 minutes after opening the box.

The floodgates (see?) really opened in 1967, after the debut of Filmation's *The Superman/Aquaman Hour of Adventure* animated cartoon. Ideal released several Justice League-related toys and playsets, and Aquaman was frequently included. He even got his own "Aqua-Family" set of figures from manufacturer Multiple Toymakers, which came with a nifty Aqua-Sub, which now commands thousands of dollars from collectors. You could also find Aquaman on a board game, Big Little Book, jigsaw puzzle, and Halloween costume, among other items. Mera got in on the action, too, as part of Ideal's "Super Queens" line of dolls, another item that will cost you more than a car nowadays.

Once *The Batman/Superman Hour* replaced *Superman/Aquaman* on Saturday mornings in 1968, however, the Sea King's appearance on store shelves similarly dried up (again, sorry). But luckily for Aquaman fans, this period didn't last long, because Hanna-Barbera's *Super Friends* debuted on September 8, 1973, and with that show came a merchandising juggernaut, encompassing numerous products, and Aquaman was along for the ride. And while we don't have the space here to catalog them all (if that is even possible), we will highlight some of the more memorable, popular, and just plain weird among them.

Any article on Aquaman toys of this period has to start with Mego. The Sea King was one of the first four "action figures" (don't worry boys, they're *not* dolls!) in Mego's World's Greatest Super-Heroes (WGS) line, alongside Superman, Batman, and Robin. Initially released in "solid front" boxes (meaning you couldn't see the figure inside before buying), Mego's Aquaman is a pretty good reproduction of the comic-book version. The one odd detail Mego felt to add was... pointed ears! Maybe the doll's designer thought this guy was Sub-Mariner, perhaps? All in all, not a big deal—

Mego Mania

The King of the Seven Seas was one of the first Mego action figures. From a 1973 Mego product catalog.

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AQUAMAN™

MERCHANDISE

OF THE

BRONZE AGE

by Rob Kelly



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AQUAMAN™*
VS.
THE GREAT
WHITE SHARK
51365

Make lots of waves with the two Super Heroes of the deep, the Great White Shark and his good friend, Aquaman, an 8" fully poseable figure. This shark measures a whopping 15" and has sleek fins that jut over the water as he swims. Watch out for those famous jaws that spring open

the moment he hits an object. But don't be afraid! His teeth don't hurt because he will not bite. He is happier when he's swimming around with Aquaman and being part of your many water adventures. You can even have the Great White Shark take Aquaman for a jaw ride.

Teeth of Terror

(top) Mego catalog promo for Aquaman vs. the Great White Shark, inspired by the *Jaws* craze of the '70s. (center) A 2015 reissue of the set. (bottom) Aquaman dives front and center onto the Mego Hall of Justice playset art.

Aquaman TM & © DC Comics.

considering how freewheeling Mego could sometimes be with its figure designs, we're lucky their Aquaman didn't come with winged feet.

Despite never being a huge seller (a.k.a. a "peg warmer," in industry parlance), Aquaman remained part of the WGS line throughout its decade-long run. No matter what packaging changes were made by Mego, you could find an Aquaman figure sporting the line's newest look. Part of that had to do with the relative low cost of the figure when it came to producing it—unlike Mego's Conan, Green Arrow, or Thor figures, Aquaman didn't come with complicated accessories or an elaborate costume—heck, he didn't even have a chest symbol that needed to be separately produced and stuck onto the doll!

Cost was also a factor in the one playset Mego produced that centered on Aquaman—namely, the infamous Aquaman vs. the Great White Shark set. Produced in 1978, Mego figured that kids' appetite for *Jaws* stuff was such that they could whip up a quick little toy and watch it fly (swim?) off the shelves. Despite the playset's nifty box design, Aquaman vs. the Great White Shark was a flop, and now the toy is nearly impossible to find in good condition. Another odd bit of trivia—in Mego's catalog that year, the Aquaman doll pictured has webbed fingers! Never released to toy shelves, exactly one example of this fishier Sea King exists, currently in the (presumably non-webbed) hands of a collector.

Mego's WGS line didn't just rely on the 8" figures, of course. There were Mego's smaller, more *Star Wars*-y Comic Action Heroes and Pocket Heroes lines, and Aquaman was part of them, too. Mego also dabbled with a 12" line, the sole WGS variation that the Sea King was not included in. He is pictured front and center—drawn by Neal Adams, no less—on their beautiful Hall of Justice playset, reminding kids that while he may not have been as big a name as Superman or Batman, he was, and always shall be, part of the team.

With the *Super Friends* now a globally recognized property, merchandisers realized they could cost-effectively adapt products they already had and turn them into the kind of things fans of the show (and the





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tie-in DC comic, which launched in 1976) would want to buy. There was a Super Friends Colorforms set featuring all five heroes doing battle against evildoers on a waterfront background. Strangely, one of the extra pieces in the set resembles Quisp, the inter-dimensional imp from the earliest issues of *Aquaman* (back then you weren't anyone in the DCU if you didn't have your own dimension-hopping imp to annoy you) but who hadn't appeared in years. There were Super Friends Shrinky Dinks, these weird little plastic things that you colored, cut, and then "baked" in the oven. There were stickers, of course, coloring books, Presto-Magix sets, Underoos (guilty), and party favors. Pretty much any toy or accessory that was made for kids' consumption had a Super Friends version of it, and Aquaman was (almost) always included, helping him become a beloved figure to a generation of kids (raises hand).

Before we move onto the 1980s and another high point for Aquaman merch, there are two specific items worth shining a lighthouse-like spotlight on. First is a 1976 "Super Heroes" Checker Set that came with little 2" cardboard representations of DC heroes and villains. Because there more pieces were needed than just the five Super Friends, the makers of the set had to go deep into the DC bench, which delighted the six-year-old me when I got the set for my birthday. Aside from the nice Aquaman piece (drawn by Dick Giordano), you got Metamorpho, Green Arrow, Black Canary, Dr. Light, and even the Shark in this thing. For a comic-book nerd, this game is manna from heaven.

The other item is one of most rare pieces of Aquaman merchandise that's ever existed, an item that is almost never found complete. I'm talking about Aquaman's Supersea Aquarium, produced in 1974 by a company called Living World. It's a perfect, if larger scale, example of a manufacturer finding a way after the fact to attach a recognizable character to an item they were already producing. Aquaman's Supersea Aquarium is pretty much just a small fish tank in molded green plastic that came with a custom-produced cardboard background

of Aquaman (drawn by Dick Giordano, aping the classic Murphy Anderson stock art pose) swimming around Atlantis. You attached this background to your tank, and *voila!* Your goldfish have been transported into the DC Universe. It also came with a small booklet with Aquaman dispensing advice on how to care and feed your fish (he doesn't mention that he probably doesn't like you holding his finny friends in captivity in the first place). I have only seen this aquarium for sale one or two times in my life, and these were not complete.

Aquaman continued appearing on various *Super Friends*-branded items throughout the late 1970s and 1980s, even as the character itself could never seem to land a permanent home in the comics (from his solo title to *Adventure Comics* to *World's Finest Comics* then back to *Adventure Comics*...). He continued to appear (if sporadically) on Saturday mornings thanks to *Super Friends*, but with Mego's WGS line winding down in 1982 he didn't appear much at all in action-figure aisles.

Then, thanks to Kenner, in 1984 he got a big boost as part of the initial wave (sorry, still not done) of the Super Powers Collection, a line of action figures that boasted near-perfect reproductions of DC's biggest stars. Featuring hidden mechanisms, which gave the figures "Super Power Action," these eight heroes and four villains were a hit with kids and collectors alike. Baring gorgeous packaging using now-classic stock art by José Luis García-López (Praise Be His Name), the Super Powers Aquaman came with a trident accessory, an item that would become ubiquitous to the character forever after. While Aquaman as a comic-book character never achieved the sales of his fellow Super Friends, having him as part of the first wave of heroes was an indication that, thanks to *Super Friends*, he simply *had* to be included in any mass-scale recreation of the DCU.

While not as long lasting, the Super Powers Collection line of merchandise was just as big, if not bigger, than had earlier come along in the early '70s for the Super Friends. There were three comic-book miniseries, coloring books, sleeping bags, crayon sets, drinking



This One's Kinda Fishy
 Living World's Aquaman Supersea Aquarium from 1974, an ultra-rare Sea King collectible. Aquaman figure on box by Dick Giordano.

Aquaman TM & © DC Comics.



glasses, jigsaw puzzles... the list goes on and on. Warner Home Video even dug up the old Filmation cartoons and rebranded them for the home-video market. As a video-store employee in the early 1990s, I can attest that at least one Aquaman fan ran these cartoons in the store's closed-circuit television system, generating the occasional rental from customers who thought they would be great for their kids.

One of the biggest differences between the Super Friends merch and the Super Powers Collection was its presentation. Pre-*Star Wars*, most film and TV studios didn't see merchandise as a major source of income, so licenses tended to be awarded haphazardly with not a lot of attention to detail. You can find some pieces of Super Friends merchandise with packaging so crudely drawn you wonder what if the artist had any clue as to what these characters were supposed to look like. The same was not true for the Super Powers Collection, which often used pre-made work by DC Style Guide artist José Luis García-López (and Dick Giordano) that came in thick binders featuring the characters in all manners of pre-approved, spot-on poses, complete with logos, closeups, and group shots. Aquaman has rarely looked better when drawn by García-López, and nowadays even the Style Guide catalogs themselves (an item never meant for public consumption in its original form) command high prices from collectors and people who appreciate great comic-book art.

Aquaman didn't get a vehicle or playset in the Super Powers Collection, but it didn't really matter. He was along for the ride, appearing alongside his fellow heroes in battle against the forces of evil. He never got a bad guy of his own to square off against—in Wave 2 Jack Kirby's Fourth World characters were added, making Darkseid the "big bad" of the line going forward. While all those figures are beautifully rendered (and it helped Kirby receive well-deserved royalties), it did mean we never got a Mera, Black Manta, or Ocean Master Super Powers figure, which is a shame—surely they would have been sights to behold.

Kenner eventually lost the DC Super Heroes license to Toy Biz, which produced a line of figures in the late 1980s about which the less said the better. Thanks in part to Peter David's work on a new *Aquaman* series, chronicled elsewhere in this issue, the Sea King would experience a rising tide of popularity that has continued mostly unabated until today. In 2011 DC made Aquaman a lynchpin of their New 52 rebranding, and in the last few years he has been on more merchandise than ever before. This is all a prelude of course to 2018's *Aquaman* movie, a turn of events this Aqua-fan would have never imagined was possible when he sat down to watch *Super Friends*, all those decades ago.

ROB KELLY (wearing *Aquaman Underoos* in this childhood photo) is a writer/artist/comics and film historian. He is the host or co-host of several shows on *The Fire and Water Podcast Network*, including *Aquaman and Firestorm: The Fire and Water Podcast*, *The Film and Water Podcast*, *TreasuryCast*, *Superman Movie Minute*, and *Pod Dylan*.



Lots of Aqua-Stuff You're Gonna Want

(top left) A screen capture from an Aquaman appearance in a 1978 Underoos TV commercial. (top right) Mego's Comic Action Hero Aquaman (with questionable hand position). (middle) The Sea King (whose name is misspelled "Aqua Man") on the 1976 Super Friends lunch box from Aladdin and the box front of the "Superadventure" (a rebranded Super Friends) Colorforms set. (bottom) The Super Powers and Toy Biz Aquaman figures.

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