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The Collecting Issue

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Miracles in Motion

CLOCKWORK TOYS OF PHILOSOPHERS AND CZARS,

AUTOMATA RETAIN THEIR POWER TO ASTONISH. • BY JONATHON KEATS



Early-19th-century double-barreled enamel pistol with pearls and diamonds from Frères Rochat. When the trigger is pulled, a singing bird flies out, opens its beak, and flaps its wings and tail. A pair sold at Christie's this year for \$5.8 million.

In the Russia of Czar Nicholas II, no secret was more closely guarded than the surprise inside the precious jeweled eggs he gave to his wife and mother each Easter. Even Nicholas himself didn't know in advance what was coming from Peter Carl Fabergé's St. Petersburg shop. He simply expected to be astounded.

Fabergé's craftsmen labored year-round to meet the czar's directive. They once wrought a miniature gold palace, and another time a carriage with working suspension. Yet none of those baubles prepared the royal family for 1908, when the dowager empress received a rock crystal egg containing an enameled peacock nesting on a golden branch. Released from its roost, the mechanical bird strutted across the imperial Easter table, turned its head, and spread its tail.

Fabergé's peacock survives today on account of an unlikely savior. Rather than smelting the eggs for precious metals, Joseph Stalin secretly sold 14 for hard cash in an attempt to salvage the Soviet economy. By the '40s, four eggs were in the hands of Maurice Sandoz, heir to the Sandoz pharmaceuticals fortune, whose collection of antique automata—clockwork animals and humans—was to become one of the finest ever assembled. Unlike the holdings of some rivals (including ill-fated King Farouk of Egypt), the Sandoz collection remains essentially intact, and this October, 50 prime pieces will travel from the Fondation Edouard et Maurice Sandoz in Switzerland for exhibit at A La Vieille Russie in New York in conjunction with luxury watchmaker and restorer Parmigiani Fleurier.

"This exhibition is a must-see for those wanting to get close to the cream of this field," says Laurence Fisher, specialist head of mechanical music, scientific instruments,

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and technical apparatus at Bonhams. And the crème de la crème—worth well in excess of \$10 million—will be Carl Fabergé's Peacock Egg.

Like Czar Nicholas II, the mechanical peacock came at the decadent end of a long and rich tradition. Legend tells of fabulous ancient and medieval clockwork creatures, from pneumatic songbirds to golden knights guarding priceless treasure. Yeats famously refers to them ("Such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make...") in *Sailing to Byzantium*. The origin of modern automata, though, came during the Enlightenment, inaugurated by French mechanician Jacques de Vaucanson in the 1730s.

De Vaucanson built two astonishing humanoid musicians—one played the flute, and another played pipes and drum—yet the automaton that brought him the most fame was a life-size mechanical duck. Unlike Fabergé's peacock, there was nothing dainty about it. The duck drank water and ate grain from people's hands—and naturalistically defecated when finished. In recognition, de Vaucanson was elevated to the French Academy and his barnyard creation was celebrated by Voltaire, who declared that without the duck "there would be nothing to remind us of the glory of France."

The tribute was only half in jest. Requiring more than a thousand moving parts, de Vaucanson's duck not only was a mechanical marvel, but also begged some very Enlightenment-era intellectual questions: Was there anything more to life than mechanics and plumbing? Could biology be mastered by science? With his philosophical toy, de Vaucanson invited man to play God.

Other mechanicians took up where de Vaucanson left off. The most famous were Pierre Jaquet-Droz and his son Henri-Louis, who, with craftsman Jean-Frédéric Leschot, in 1774 made a miniature clockwork boy that dipped his quill pen in an inkwell and wrote such witticisms as "I think, therefore I am." Though the philosophical joke was appreciated by the French, Catholic Spain was more wary. Accused of heresy by the Inquisition while visiting the royal court in Madrid, the machine, fashionably dressed in silk pantaloons, spent several months in a Spanish prison.

After that debacle, most Jaquet-Droz automata were less philosophically precocious. "De Vaucanson was in the market of ideas," says Bernard Pin, cocurator of the Sandoz exhibition. "Jaquet-Droz was in the market of commerce." And the automata that sold best in that era were songbirds. There are several in the Sandoz collection, and similar ones come up periodically at auction.

In 2007, Skinner sold a Jaquet-Droz & Leschot bird box—a tabletop contraption from which an enameled bird emerges to flutter and sing at the slide of a lever—for \$189,000, and the following year Antiquorum sold a songbird in a gilded cage for \$167,400. The Antiquorum automaton includes a clock, which activates the automaton every half hour, triggering the bird to sing one of seven 18th-century tunes (as live canaries were trained to do). "It's remarkable how difficult these things are to pull off mechanically," comments Robert C. Cheney, director of science, technology, and clocks at Skinner. "They were items for the amusement of the very wealthy."

According to Daryn Schnipper, international chairman of watches at Sotheby's, they were also "used as bribes by Westerners in China. They'd



From top: Nineteenth-century birdcage and clock in gilded bronze attributed to Pierre Jaquet-Droz; the birds flutter and sing six tunes in rotation. Peter Carl Fabergé's 1906 Swan Egg in 14-karat gold trellised with rose-cut diamonds; the swan paddles its feet, unfurls its wings, and flaps its tail. A strutting Fabergé Gold Peacock is wound up by raising a wing feather.



From top: Fabergé's famous 1908 Peacock Egg. The Professor and Errant Student by Rouillet & Decamps; the teacher chides, the student reads, and the donkey ears wave. The 1890 silk-clad Bebe Ombrelle hunts butterflies in time to music.



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give them as gifts to officials in order to do business." Among the most precious were the smallest, requiring feats of mechanical ingenuity on the cutting edge of technology. In 1810, Jaquet-Droz collaborator Henri Maillardet reached the apex of mechanical wonder with his illustrious Ethiopian Caterpillar. Together with his Siberian Mouse and Egyptian Lizard, the fancifully named insect was a life-size automaton with perfectly realistic movement. In accordance with Chinese taste, the naturalism was enhanced with fine enamel coloration and markings made of diamonds, rubies, and emeralds. "It was the bling of the day," Schnipper quips, and the allure has not diminished with time. One of the few Ethiopian Caterpillars not owned by an institution—the Fondation Sandoz has two of them—was auctioned by Sotheby's last year for \$412,600.

Yet 19th-century technological progress also had a second, contrasting effect on automata. Industrialization made them cheaper to build. The market gradually migrated from the royal palace to the bourgeois parlor, and the center of production moved from Switzerland to France. "The French were by far the pioneers in this," says Stuart Holbrook, president of Theriault's. "They combined all the aspects of what makes a true parlor fancy a truly theatrical piece."

Often the mechanical theatrics took inspiration from popular events like the circus, featuring automaton clowns performing acrobatic feats to music. In 2005, Theriault's auctioned one of the most spectacular, a piece by Gustave Vichy in which a 3-foot-tall acrobat grasping two chairs appears to defy gravity. At \$85,000, the price was equally lofty. A year earlier, Theriault's auctioned a Rouillet & Decamps female magician that performed tricks in a couture-quality costume for \$88,000. "There's an incredible whimsy to these acrobats and magicians," observes Holbrook, "and the whimsy is achieved with beautiful artistry."

Not that automaton birds were ever threatened with extinction. A Frenchman named Blaise Bontems—the last man known to have possessed de Vaucanson's duck—was so obsessed with natural fidelity that he transcribed the songs of starlings and magpies in the forest, emulating them in bird boxes that any urban middle-class family could afford. He also made freestanding automata that moved their heads and opened their beaks as they chirped, such as a chased silver skylark sold last year by Bonhams for \$36,600. Reportedly, there was once a feathered crow, too, although, mercifully, Bontems left it to Rouillet & Decamps to construct a replica of the notoriously shrill peacock. An example of that bird—which walked and spread its tail without letting out a peep—sold at Christie's in 2004 for a mere \$2,570.

In the 1970s, Bernard Pin did restoration work for Gaston Decamps, the son of the automata artisan Ernest. Recently looking at the internal workings of the 1908 Fabergé egg, Pin made a remarkable discovery. "If we compare the mechanisms of the Fabergé peacock and the Decamps one, it is exactly the same organization," he says, noting, too, that Decamps exhibited his peacock in Moscow around the turn of the century, before work on the Fabergé bird was begun. "We have no proof," he cautions, but the implications are clear: Derived from the playthings of nobility, a bourgeois toy became once more a bauble of royalty.

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YOUR PLAY

In the early 19th century, many of the finest European automata were sent to China. Early in the 20th century, much of the best material returned, acquired by collectors like Maurice Sandoz. Now the priciest items are going back again. China is "the new top end of the market," according to Daryn Schnipper of Sotheby's, who has seen prices skyrocket in the past couple of years, especially on items with delicate enameling. The Ethiopian Caterpillar (see article) sold by Sotheby's in 2010 fetched more than five times the price for an identical piece at Sotheby's in 2006. And a pair of bejeweled singing-bird pistols made for the Chinese market by Frères Rochat around 1820—songbirds emerge from the barrels when the triggers are pulled—sold at Christie's earlier this year for \$5.84 million, well above the high estimate.

Almost simultaneously—albeit for unrelated reasons—19th-century French automata have become a bargain. "Three to five years ago, there was a peak of interest," says Robert C. Cheney of Skinner. "The market was driven by a small handful of very aggressive collectors, and most players at that level have now filled up their homes." He recalls selling a pair of life-size blackamoor musician automata by Jean Rouillet for \$501,000 in late 2007. "I doubt we could do that today," he says. "In some cases prices have dropped by 50 percent." Stuart Holbrook of Theriault's concurs. "Because it's a niche market, five or six people can have a huge effect," he observes. "Now is a perfect market for new collectors to get started."

Compelling examples by famous makers such as Rouillet & Decamps, Vichy, and Lambert can be acquired at auction for \$5,000 to \$10,000. Holbrook always looks for three key factors—"music, motion, and fancy"—seeking pieces that combine melodic tunes with fluid movement in figures showing delicate craftsmanship, ideally without restoration. For Laurence Fisher of Bonhams, there's a simpler test. "Look at the face," he says. "It's on a high level if the eyes pierce you like a human stare."

RESOURCES

EXHIBITION

"Mechanical Wonders:
The Sandoz Collection,"
October 26–November 26,
A La Vielle Russie, alvr.com

AUCTION HOUSES

Antiquorum
212-750-1103, antiquorum.com
Bonhams
212-644-9001, bonhams.com
Christie's
212-492-5485, christies.com
Skinner
617-350-5400, skinnerinc.com
Sotheby's
212-606-7000, sothebys.com
Theriault's
800-638-0422, theriaults.com

MUSEUM COLLECTIONS

- The Maurice Yves Sandoz Collection, Musée d'Horlogerie du Locle in Château des Monts, Switzerland, mhl-monts.ch
- The Automata of Jaquet-Droz, Musée d'Art et d'Histoire in Neuchâtel, Switzerland, mahn.ch
- Maillardet's Writing Automaton, Franklin Institute in Philadelphia, fi.edu
- Théâtre des Automates, Musée des Arts et Métiers in Paris, arts-et-metiers.net
- The Murtoth D. Guinness Collection, Morris Museum in Morristown, New Jersey, morrismuseum.org



From top:
Early-19th-century gold-and-enamel English pocket watch whose hands scissor in and out according to the shape of the oval case. Vichy's circa-1895 Acrobat Clown performs gravity-defying gymnastics with the chairs, including lifting himself into the air. An eagle's beak points to the hour on the rotating dials of this French pyramid clock, circa 1780.