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The Marvellous Mechanical Museum review – marvels ex machina

Compton Verney, Warwickshire

Four centuries of automata whirl into wondrous life in a show that's as much performance as it is exhibition



Silver Elephant Automaton, c1900, by Fabergé. Photograph: Royal Collection Trust / © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2018

Standing sentry at the door to this enthralling exhibition is a lively figure known as *The Connoisseur*. He wears a linen suit and an expression of expert discrimination. Press a button and he leans forward to examine some unseen object, then gradually backwards to give serious weight to his judgment. He might be one of us, a fellow visitor who is also our surrogate.

Tim Hunkin's sculpture – made out of papier-mache art reviews, some from this very newspaper – is comical, mechanical, exquisitely expressive. It is both a work of art and an automaton. So it was with the earliest automata: the mythical clay figures animated by Prometheus; the female statue that Pygmalion brought to life and loved; and so it remains. This is one crucial difference between an automaton, a robot and a puppet.



Les Demoiselles, 2017, by Paul Spooner. Photograph: © Paul Spooner, photographed by Mike Halsey

At Compton Verney this summer you can see automata created by artists across four centuries, including Ting-Tong Chang's modern speaking goose (2017), so lifelike it seems about to take flight in the middle of a hilarious lecture on avian digestion. Exotic birds flutter and sing in their 18th-century cages. A Victorian girl walks on her own two elegant feet, crinoline swishing, and mice skitter across a table top while the women in Picasso's *Demoiselles d'Avignon* emerge into three dimensions, courtesy of Paul Spooner, untwisting from their cubist contortions.

They have the spark of life – or half-life; beautiful yet eerie, like us but soulless and abjectly dependent. Or frightened and frightening, like the monster in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, published two centuries ago and which this show partly commemorates. We make these creatures in our own likeness, however approximate, and sometimes they get away from us – which is, after all, the intention.

Prints by the contemporary artist Stuart Patience visualise with considerable graphic force the plot of ETA Hoffmann's celebrated short story *The Sandman*, which inspired Sigmund Freud. The young man Nathanael falls in love with a lifesize automaton, the perfect Olympia; woos her, talks to her, dances with her at a ball and then watches her moving about through distant windows. Eventually he is shattered to discover what everyone else can see: the mechanical limbs at work beneath her dress.

Clockwork is the beating heart of these marvellous machines, especially in earlier centuries. It makes the birds sing, the lovers kiss, the Fabergé elephant swing its trunk while ambling along. In a mesmerisingly strange rococo vignette, straight out of Watteau, it keeps the dancers twirling and the melancholy violinist bowing away until the power runs out: a chronicle love's death foretold.

A Swiss clockmaker named Henri Maillardet built the most famous of 19th-century automata: a little boy, seated at a desk with a pen in his hand who could draw four different pictures when wound up and presented with paper. Maillardet used a camshaft invented by Islamic scientists centuries earlier to motivate the figure, which disappeared for many years but is now in an American museum. Compton Verney has one of the boy's drawings, of a garden with fountains and palms that looks fabulously exotic and slightly oriental. (China was for a long time the main automaton market.) The mechanism, for all the infinitely subtle hand movements required to produce this drawing, is so complex as to be justifiably compared with a modern computer.

The curators of this compelling show started out with an object in Compton Verney's own collection: a pair of wooden workers from 1900, one turning a clay pot, the other labouring to sustain the motion of the wheel, wiping the sweat from his brow. Automata may represent the human condition, reflecting our lives back to us. This is the subject of a brilliant 2016 film called *The Machinery* by Caroline Radcliffe and Sarah Angliss, in which the former performs a heel-and-toe clog dance that was once tapped out daily by female workers in Victorian cotton mills. Industry turned them into automata, almost. The dancer resembles a latterday Coppélia.



Flying Basket, 1983; model for *The Mice and the Flying Basket*, by Rodney Peppé. Photograph: © Rodney Peppé

One section of this show is devoted to slot-machine automata: Blake's Tyger whirling about in the forest; painters grafting away at easels; a bather diving straight from his beach hut into cold blue waters. There is much English whimsy and seaside humour, but the real star here has a far more eccentric imagination: Rowland Emmett, Punch cartoonist, kinetic sculptor and designer of the elaborate contraptions of Caractacus Potts in *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*.

Here for almost the first time in its working entirety is *A Quiet Afternoon in the Cloud Cuckoo Valley*, in which Emmett's elaborate train carriages trundle their way around lifesize tracks, bearing the old gentleman playing his gramophone, the old lady leaning out to catch songbirds, all to the sound of music-box lullabies. The names of the trains invoke those dreamy pre-Beeching days – Bluebell, Cuckoo, Watercress Line. This is the kind of creation Heath Robinson might have drawn in all its improbable intricacy, but Emmett actually invented and made.

With its theatrical installation and jewel-coloured lighting, this show is a performance in its own right. It seems to tell an alternative version of European history, in which man and machine have an otherworldly relationship that goes far beyond master and creation.

In the final gallery, sculptures that resemble vast grey brains lie dormant in glass cases – dormant until mechanical fingers prod at them. The organisms shiver, quiver, recoil, retrench, as if in fight or flight. The work, by the young sculptor Harrison Pearce, probes at the very quick of one's own imaginings. And beside it a scarlet velvet-clad arm rears and turns on a plinth, articulate, emphatic, jabbing, as if preaching to some unseen congregation of fellow automata. Like the sculptures of Prometheus, or the little drawing boy at his desk, it is recognisably human yet entirely alien.



A Quiet Afternoon in the Cloud Cuckoo Valley, 1988-89, by Rowland Emmett. Photograph: cloudcuckoovalley.com