

Affordable Automata

The Whimsical Animals of Roulet & Decamps

by Larry Karp

Though automata have come to rank high on collector price lists, such is not always the case. In particular, the French company, Roulet & Decamps, manufacturers of a wide range of major automata after 1865, also turned out large numbers of less-sophisticated, far less costly pieces that most modern collectors would love to include in their displays. A reproduced Roulet & Decamps catalog from 1878 shows a staggering array of animated cats, bears, rabbits and other animals, some with music, some without!

Here are some specific examples.

Photo 1 shows a white rabbit in a silk lettuce, 7" high. His fur is in fact rabbit (as is the fur on most of these smaller R&D animals); his eyes are glass. At rest, only his ears and the top of his head are visible. To musical accompani-

ment, he rises from hiding, flips his ears forward, and inclines his head to nibble a leaf. Then he abruptly drops back inside the lettuce.

The key in this picture is a replacement; Roulet & Decamps keys have either round brass grips with central holes, or are of steel with oval, hollow grips.

The automaton in Photo 2 operates in a similar manner: as the small, single-tune musical mechanism plays, a white-furred cat with green glass eyes rises from his place of hiding inside a cream jug and sticks out his tongue - whether in pleasure over the taste of the cream or in satisfaction at getting away with his naughty deed. Then, having expressed himself, he drops back to



Photo 1. Rabbit in lettuce.



Photo 2. Cat in cream jug.



Photo 3. Harpist-bear.

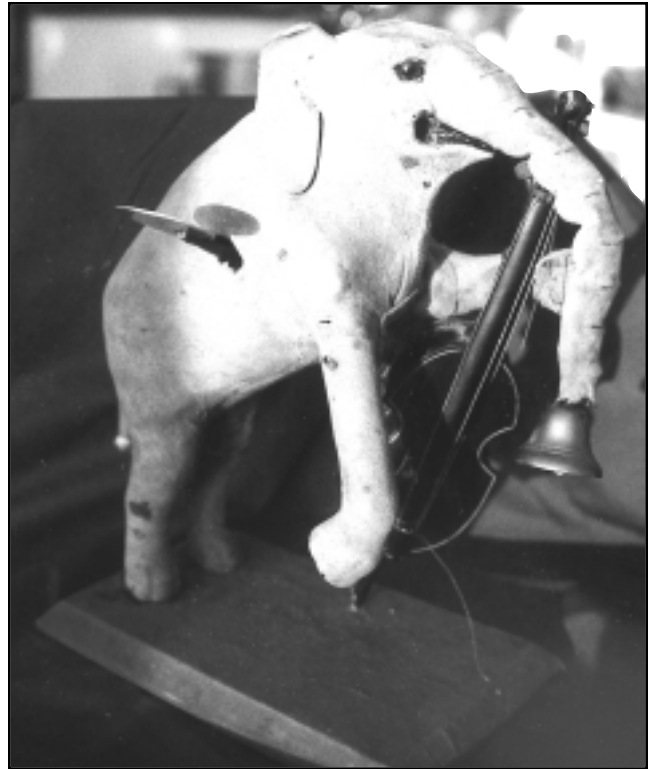


Photo 4. Elephant with bass fiddle

hiding. The automaton is 9-1/2" high.

Photo 3 shows a harpist-bear, 14-3/4" high, clearly enjoying his music, inclining his head first left, then right, as his hands move alternately up and down the strings of his instrument. These movements, by the way - head side to side, hands up and down - could almost be classified as "fundamental small automaton motion," being found in many older, smaller pieces, as well as in automata currently being put together with new musical mechanisms and old doll-heads and fabric. The bear's fur is dyed rabbit; his eyes, black glass; the harp, gold-painted wood. The stand is a simple piece of wood covered in velvet.

Photo 4 is another musically gifted animal, an elephant, 16" high, who plays the bass fiddle. This fellow is covered in fine gray leather, and like the bear he stands on a velvet-covered piece of wood, his small musical mechanism concealed within his abdomen. Unfortunately he has lost his bow, his right leg hangs limp and broken, and he seems to have fallen victim to ivory hunters. Currently he's undergoing restorative surgery including tusk transplant, at which point we'll know whether he swings his trunk to play his brass bell along with the music, or whether the bell is merely decorative.

Photo 5 shows another cat, this one 13-1/4" long and 9-1/2" high, covered in the usual white rabbit fur, and with whiskers and green glass eyes. In Photo 6 we see the bottoms of the cat's feet - with their small



Photo 5. Walking, meowing cat.



Photo 8. Jumping, growling tiger.



Photo 6. Wheeled feet of walking cat.

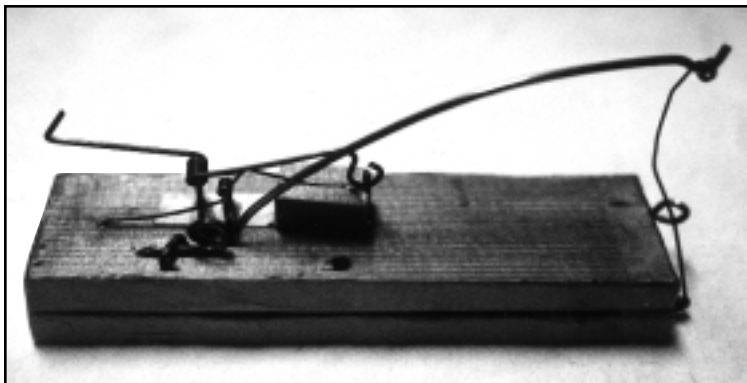


Photo 7. Cat bellows that produces meow.



Photo 9. Jumping, growling tiger.



Photo 10. Wood-sawing bear.

wooden wheels. This is a walking cat: wind him up, push the lever just below his tail, and his four jointed legs move as he propels himself forward. In addition, his tail unwinds backward, then flips smartly forward, and his mouth opens and closes, and he meows. The mechanism for this latter function is shown in Photo 7; it's a small springloaded bellows with a tiny reed inside, located along with the mechanism within the abdomen of the cat. Periodically, the bellows is opened, then closed quickly to produce a very realistic cat cry. There is no music.

Photos 8 and 9 are of a marvelous "jumping tiger", 18-1/8" long and 6-3/4" high, covered in tiger-striped flocking, with a generous array of cat-whiskers. Turn him on, he slowly crouches back on his hind legs, all the time growling (the result of a metal strip inside being worked rapidly against a gear-edge) and regarding his observers fiercely with his glass eyes. Then, he suddenly leaps forward into the face of the closest watcher, a move that usually brings forth quite a shriek if that person has never before seen a jumping tiger-automaton. Were these tigers being marketed today they'd undoubtedly come with labels warning of the consequences of exposure for persons with cardiac conditions.

In Photo 10 we see a wood-sawing bear, wearing a wire muzzle by which he's chained to a birchbark-cov-



Photo 11. Drinking bear.

ered wooden base. He's 11-3/4" high, and turns his head side-to-side as he saws away right-pawed. A constant sound, similar to the tiger's growl but not as deep, comes from within the bear; in this case it's probably intended to simulate the noise of the saw.

Our last picture, Photo 11, shows a seated, drinking bear, 13" high. No sound at all here, no music, no growl; on activation the bear raises his right arm, pours water from the metal bottle into the cup, then raises the cup to his lips and tilts his head to "drink." Then the action repeats. When this bear first came to our house the rubber tubing to conduct water from the hole at the base of the cup, down the left arm, across the back, through the right arm, and back into the bottle, was disintegrated to powder. It was easy, however, to use a very long, gently-curved surgical clamp to pull across and attach a replacement conduit of modern plastic tubing, so the bear should be able to enjoy his refreshment for many years to come.

Keep watch at auctions, antique shows, doll and toy sales. These delightful Roulet & Decamps creations are out there, in most cases, priced within the means of an average collector.

REFERENCE

¹ Bailly, Christian. *Automata, the Golden Age*. Sotheby's Publications, 1987, pp. 333.

Credit for photos: Larry Karp