

EPPUR SI MUOVE



After the success of multi-award winning film *Hugo*, automata – those mysterious creatures created by inventors dreaming of a world of self-operating machines – are back in the spotlight. A threefold exhibition in Switzerland invites visitors to see the best of an art reflecting the most ambitious dreams of a brave new world.

BY SERGIO ZAGIER WITH THE COLLABORATION OF CLAUDIA HERRERA

In 2012, a beautiful, magical film won five Oscars after being nominated in 11 categories. Set in Paris in the 1930s, *Hugo* tells the story of an orphan boy living in the walls of a train station. Hugo's father, a watchmaker, has left the boy something that connects him to a shopkeeper who is in fact illusionist and cinema pioneer George Méliès. The connection between them is an automaton: primitive robots created by masters of micromechanics (master watchmakers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries) to extrapolate their tiny time-measuring universe to more spectacular landscapes.

In the twentieth century, electricity and electronics controlled the extra-human capacity of performing complex tasks. Today it is quite difficult to imagine a world without automatic processes. But only two or three centuries ago, some wonders were only possible using cogs, strings, springs and the like – the raw materials of watchmakers.

Mechanical wonders like Hugo's automaton fell into oblivion as they were replaced by more useful, less romantic machines. The same happened to classic timepieces when cheaper digital watches flooded the market in the 1970s. Luckily for those mesmerized by these coin-sized complex mechanisms, haute horlogerie did not become extinct as a result, but rather got more sophisticated: from hour-counting artifacts to impossibly accurate jewels.

Automata had a different fate. Few people know what an automaton is nowadays. But they are coming back to life – where else but in Switzerland? And they are doing so not to teach us their principles or show us their inner workings but to see how our jaws drop as we look at the rare specimens that have come down to us. Found in public or private collections, these automata are being showcased in three locations in the Mecca of watchmaking: La Chaux-de-Fonds, Le Locle and Neuchâtel. A unique, once-in-a-lifetime event, indeed.



ONE EXHIBITION,
THREE MUSEUMS,
THREE ANDROIDS

The exhibition *Automates & Merveilles* is running from 29 April to 30 September 2012. The three towns are close by, so it is possible to visit all three venues in a single day. However, it is advisable to allow at least a day and a half to avoid seeing things in a hurry. In addition, all three museums have permanent collections that are also worth taking a look at, especially the Musée international d'horlogerie in La Chaux-de-Fonds – a must-attend for watch collectors or watch lovers.

The exhibition in La Chaux-de-Fonds focuses on mechanical wonders. It is an annex to the museum's permanent collection consisting of a few cases and a small auditorium where, on certain days and hours, you can see the flagship pieces at work: *La Musicienne* by Henri-Louis Jaquet-Droz; *Le Tapis Volant*, a contemporary work by François Junod (the man behind the automaton in Hugo) or *Le Grand Magicien*, answering a set of tailored questions. Guided by curator Jean-Michel Piguet, we caught a glimpse of the most striking pieces on display.

At the Musée d'horlogerie du Locle, they show luxury and miniature pieces in an elegant château that is part of the history of Swiss watchmaking. The palace itself is worth paying a visit. If you add the fact that the guide at the museum is Phoebe Forsey – the wife of the prestigious watchmaker

who created Greubel Forsey –, the experience becomes even more interesting. The exhibition's central piece is *Le Dessinateur*, Jaquet-Droz's drawing automaton.

Last but not least, the exhibition in Neuchâtel, held at the Musée d'art et d'histoire, is dedicated to Jaquet-Droz, his father Pierre and Jean-Frédéric Leschot. It is the most educational of them all, following stricter museum criteria. We got around with Caroline Junier, who shared her enthusiasm as the person who had the idea of this exhibition and turned it into reality. The masterpiece here is the automaton *L'Ecrivain*. The Neuchâtel museum owns the three greatest creations by Jaquet-Droz, lending the other venues two of them for the exhibitions to be well-balanced.



MASTERS AND CREATORS

Although François Junod's mechanical creatures are dazzling combinations of art and ingenuity, eighteenth-century geniuses Jaquet-Droz Sr. and Jr. are the real stars in all three exhibitions – which, by the way, are sponsored by the Jaquet-Droz watch-making company.

Pierre Jaquet-Droz (the great creator) and his son Henri-Louis (the entrepreneur), alongside their assistant Jean-Frédéric Leschot (the fine technician), embarked on a creative and business adventure that made history. Their mechanical prototypes were shown in European museums and galleries to the amazement of viewers, irrespective of their social background. Four are their masterpieces; three of them are androids, on show in the current exhibitions in Switzerland. According to the chronicles of the day, the fourth one was a miniature court scene with several moving figures. Nobody knows what became of it.

The three androids perform different tasks. *La Musicienne* is a lady playing an organ. Her fingers and facial expressions, even the way she moves her eyes or breathes, are controlled by her inner mechanics. The organ is real, playing as the lady presses its keys.

Le Dessinateur is a boy sitting at a desk and drawing delicate pre-established models with a pencil. The android in *Hugo*, designed by François Junod, is also a draftsman. *L'Ecrivain*, the best-known of them all, is, of course, a scribe. Like the draftsman, it is a boy with his body full of minute bronze cogwheels, coded gears and cams.

Although the androids are mesmerizing in their tricks, they can be disturbing. In his 1919 essay 'The Uncanny,' Sigmund Freud wrote about automata as examples of things that produce an uncanny effect.

The other pieces in the exhibition include singing birds in golden cages, complete with feathers and



flapping wings, exquisitely enameled music boxes, crying dolls, pocket watches containing country scenes and other marvels imagined over two centuries ago.

Maybe there has been no other time in history when art and mechanics, magic and invention came so close together. ♦

