

# Museum of Childhood's Summer Exhibition – It's Alive!

*Mechanical Marvels are moving in to The Museum of Childhood*



Edinburgh City Council's Museum of Childhood plays host this summer to 40 special clockwork characters in a free exhibition from the House of Automata.

Opening on 22 June, this unique collection of mechanical marvels will include an amazing magician in faded silks, who keeps us guessing as he runs through his cups-and-balls routine; a dazzling acrobat based on a famous Moulin Rouge performer; and Heba, a beautiful harpist whose graceful hands strum delightful tunes.


Fine automata such as these were made to entertain the fashionable elite of Paris in the late 1800s, and bring together the arts of the clockmaker, sculptor and couturier. 'It's Alive! Mechanical Marvels from the House of Automata' will provide the first free, interactive and atmospheric display of these incredible examples of craftsmanship in Edinburgh (22 June – 18 September).

Famous makers including Vichy and Roulet-Decamps are to be represented in a display of mechanical animals. From proud strutting peacocks to performing elephants and creeping kittens, these popular 19th Century gifts for children were exported across the world.

Exquisite feathered birds in gilded cages will make up an 'automatic aviary', including a very early music box called a serinette, which was used to teach baby canaries how to sing.

Younger visitors will enjoy operating six of the automata by hand – including a cheeky rabbit in a cabbage, a drinking bear, and a bolting horse made of folded paper – while technically-minded museum-goers will enjoy seeing interior springs, gears and cams translate into realistic

movement.

The Museum of Childhood is operated by the City of Edinburgh Council. Lynne Halfpenny, the Council's Director of Culture, said: "Both beautiful and bizarre, these curious Victorian toys reveal incredible craftsmanship." 

"This is the first time we have displayed such a wide range of mechanical toys in Edinburgh. Sourced by the House of Automata from all over the world, their collection features some of the quirkiest and impressive pieces we know of.

"A trip to the free display offers the perfect chance to visit our Museum of Childhood before it undergoes refurbishment later this year. Don't miss it."

Alice Sage, Museum of Childhood Exhibition Curator, explained: "In our age of artificial intelligence and microprocessors, the magic of clockwork remains so awe-inspiring. It's very exciting to share this world-class collection of automata with our visitors.

"In this exhibition, we look back to a time when craftsmen and philosophers alike grappled with the idea of mechanical life. In their workshops, automata makers used all their talents to create delicate, delightful machines whose only job was to entertain us. A century later, the beautiful machines still perform at the turn of a key."

All of these treasures come from the collection of Michael and Maria Start. Michael, automata historian and horologist, and Maria, virtuoso sculptor and artist, are together known as the House of Automata. They restore, advise and make automata to commission, and are passionate promoters of the history and ideas behind them.

Maria and Michael Start added: "The people of Edinburgh's historical fascination with anatomy and what constitutes life itself make this city a very welcoming place for our mechanical life. We hope the exhibition at the Museum of Childhood will help people to understand a little more, what it means to be alive and ticking.

Alongside the historic objects, a new series of etchings by artist Robert Powell will take visitors on a witty and dark journey to find automata in culture and myth. 'Pneuma: The Mechanical Egg' includes Roger Bacon's Brazen Head, Vaucanson's Digesting Duck, the Chess Playing Turk (who beat even Napoleon) and Francine, the mechanical daughter of Descartes.

Robert Powell is an award-winning Edinburgh-based artist, whose work has been shown across Scotland and internationally. His exquisite hand-coloured etchings are alive with strange and satirical characters, who walk the line between mechanical and human life.

It's Alive! Mechanical Marvels from the House of Automata opens at the Museum of Childhood on Thursday 22 June.

*(Images courtesy of Edinburgh City Council)*