Child's Play

Christian Bailly has built a $6-million automaton called the Bird Trainer. Now can he find a buyer?

Here's a lesson learned in childhood: Dolls can be spooky. Catch one staring at you across a dim bedroom or from a shop window on a quiet street, and try to remind yourself it's only a toy. *Why's that thing grinning at me? Did it just blink?*

As it happens, some of the world's most sought-after and valuable dolls *do* blink, not to mention execute stunts and perform music. Automata, or clockwork-driven, self-operating figures, have entertained and unnerved audiences for more than two centuries with their uncannily lifelike movements. The first and most complex automata emerged in the royal courts of 18th-century Europe; a few pieces from that era survive in museums. Modern-day automata enthusiasts collect examples from the late 19th century—diminutive magicians, musicians, jugglers and clowns made in greater numbers out of small workshops in the Marais district of Paris. The most unusual among them can change hands for more than $100,000.

"Part of their fascination is that they're unsettling and people don't know why," says Michael Start of Automatomania, a seller and refurbisher of antique automata in Moray, Scotland. Start has handled works by all the important 19th-century Parisian craftsmen: Vichy, Roullet & Decamps, Lambert and others. But one of the most impressive examples of the art he's seen has a more recent vintage.

It's called the Bird Trainer, a four-foot-tall young man carrying a sword, holding a flute and dressed in embroidered Renaissance garb made of silk, satin and velvet. His skin is painted porcelain, his eyes are glass, and when wound with a golden key, he lifts a flute to his lips and



I, ROBOT: The Bird Trainer stands four feet tall and weighs 122 pounds.

plays the "Marche des Rois" by Georges Bizet and an older, 18th-century tune. A pair of birds perched on his shoulder and hand twitter and sing. His eyes move, his head nods, the birds open and close their beaks, turn their heads and flap their wings. There is no motorized or electrical power source. Actions are driven by a hidden anatomy of spring-driven cogs and gears, 2,340 mechanical parts all, each one gilt or polished steel. Finished last year in a Swiss workshop by a company called Jacob Frisard (after the 18th-century creator of mechanical singing birds), the Bird Trainer took a group of artisans six years to build, and standing on its pedestal of jade and mother-of-pearl, the completed figure weighs 122 pounds. In motion—his fingers working the flute, his eyes cutting back and forth—the figure is oddly beautiful and a little disquieting. Scarier still is the asking price: $6.25 million.

"If I knew how much it would cost me to make it, I would not have started," says French-born Christian Bailly, the world's foremost automata expert and as the owner of Jacob Frisard, the Bird Trainer's principal creator. Like a modern-day Geppetto, Bailly has watched his Bird Trainer take on a life of its own, rapidly outrunning its planned budget of $400,000. To pay for the precious materials used in its construction, and for the dressmakers, sculptors, jewelers, wig-makers, marquetry artists and other specialists, many of whom he paid $80 to $200 an hour for months of work, Bailly sold his collection of antique furniture, paintings and more than a hundred 19th-century automata he'd amassed over 40 years. "I sold all of these pieces for my crazy project," he says. Today, the Bird Trainer plus another creation, a jeweled cane with a singing bird hidden inside (asking price: $463,000), are finished—and Bailly needs buyers. "I didn't have a customer in mind making this," he says. "I'm very naive in this way. And now I have one penny in my pocket."

Christian Bailly taught himself to refurbish the mechanics of automata in the early 1970s when he began taking them apart to discover how they worked. He trolled the Paris flea market for antique silks and laces to mend their costumes, and continues to do repair work for other collectors around the world. In 1987 he published *Automata: The Golden Age, 1848-1914*, a gorgeously illustrated book chronicling the work of the important automata makers from the Marais. The book, brought out by Sotheby's, is still the definitive history on the subject and has drawn new collectors into the market. Debra Natale, for instance, bought her first automaton on eBay for $8,000 after reading Bailly's book. She went on to collect more pieces (and to become Bailly's girlfriend and assistant), including a prized organ grinder made by Jean Marie Phalibois, circa 1880. "His face is unbelievable," says Natale. "His mouth moves, his eyelids, his eyes—his skin almost seems to be moving. It's almost an eerie effect because it's so realistic."



Her enthusiasm is shared by fellow automata collectors, a tightly knit and largely male club who speak about their collections like awestruck children. "They're alive!" says Jerry Steinbaum, a real estate investor in Los Angeles who considers his collection, 75 pieces in mint condition, to be the largest in the U.S. "What's fun for me is winding them up and seeing all the things they can do with cams and wires. You're not looking at a doll face. You're looking at a human face. It's a hobby that makes you smile."



Above: **the Morris Museum's Clown Illusionist**
Left: **the Lady Magician, top earner from Theriault's sale of Bailly's collection**

A few auction houses specialize in antique automata: Christie's holds auctions in London, as does the Galerie de Chartres outside Paris. In the U.S., Skinner in Boston and Theriault's in Annapolis, Maryland, have sold major works. It was the latter that auctioned Christian Bailly's collection of automata at a sale in Las Vegas in May 2004.

"It was a monumental sale," says Stuart Holbrook, president of Theriault's. A 32-inch Lady Magician, who uncovers the heads of a clown, doll and monkey on a table, sold for $88,000. An acrobat who balances one-handed on a chair sold for $56,000. A Parisian man who shares a cigarette with his pet poodle (both exhale smoke) went for $45,000.

Holbrook has noticed growing attention to automata since the Bailly auction. At press time, Theriault's was readying another major automata sale in Morristown, New Jersey, home to the Morris Museum, exhibitors of one of the most significant automata collections in the world, that of the late Murtogh D. Guinness. Holbrook says that he expects the auction and a behind-the-scenes tour of the museum's holdings to attract top collectors from all over the U.S., Japan, Europe, Australia and South Africa.

Yet even the most committed automata collector would likely balk at the asking price of a modern-day piece like Bailly's Bird Trainer. "I wouldn't want it," says Frank DeMayo, a collector in Fort Wayne, Indiana. "It's more like a piece of jewelry, not like your common automaton. Another thing, it's a reproduction. I don't care for reproductions."

"There's never been anything in our field that's gone for this price," says Holbrook of the Bird Trainer. "The world record for a doll is $230,000. That's the stratosphere for us. Now you're talking about millions? Bailly would be completely breaking down barriers and opening up a new perspective on what people will pay for these things. It's a courageous step."

Holbrook adds that comparing Bailly's Bird Trainer, or his other creation, the jeweled cane with singing bird, to the automata that regularly come up for auction is a mistake. Nineteenth-century automata, while pricey in their day, were nevertheless produced in runs of dozens or hundreds. "[Bailly's pieces] are different in every way," says Nick Hawkins, of Skinner auction house. "Their level of complexity is much closer to automata from the century before." These include priceless, one-of-a-kind pieces such as 18th-century London jeweler James Cox's Silver Swan (held at the Bowes Museum in Barnard Castle near Durham, England) or lost legends like Jacques de Vaucanson's Duck, which, reportedly, could flap its wings and eat and excrete food—marvels of mechanical engineering made to entertain Europe's wealthiest elite.

Bailly knows he needs to connect with a similar demographic to sell his Bird Trainer. "Good people you can find," he says, "but to sell this piece you need to find exceptional people."

One difficulty is in exhibition. Bailly has crated and moved the Bird Trainer out of his workshop in Sainte-Croix, Switzerland, only once, presenting it at the Baselworld watch and jewelry show in May 2005. There, he attracted the attention of Hong Kong luxury goods agency Christie International Group Holdings, Ltd., who arranged to represent the Bird Trainer and the jeweled cane in Asia.

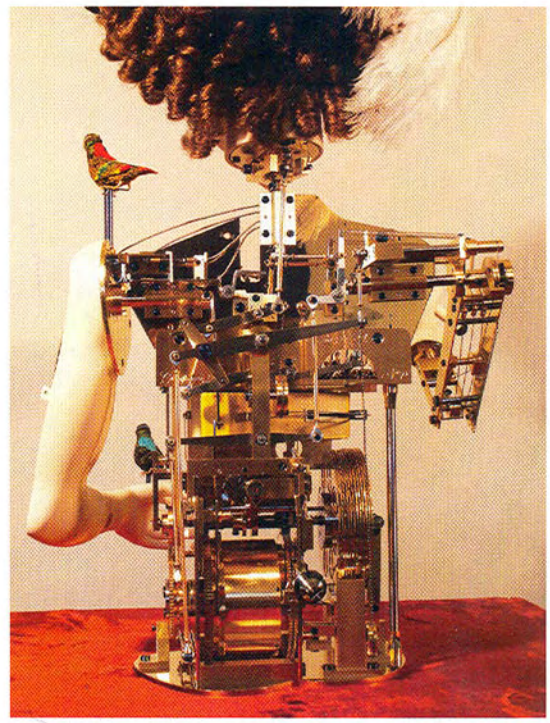
Bailly is keeping his fingers crossed: The president of the agency, Christie Wo, is well-connected to China's newly moneyed class. She has already organized two exhibitions for his jeweled cane (which can more easily be transported to Hong Kong than the Bird Trainer), and has arranged advertising for his work. "Nobody has exhibited automata in China," Bailly says, hoping that someone there might therefore be wowed by the novelty of his works more easily than Western collectors.

"Yes, I think there's a market for it," says Holbrook. "It's a parlor fancy, an ego piece for someone."

"There's a chance," agrees Michael Start. After Bailly exhibited at Basel, Start got calls from jewelry collectors of his acquaintance. "They were asking me about the price and could this possibly be justified for a modern piece." Start told them he believed it was. "I had to say, you can't buy anything else like it, and if you want it, you have to pay that price. Yes, it's a crazy price, but it's a fantasy piece.

"It's a deeply impressive thing," Start continues. "When I saw it in its skeletal form I was absolutely blown away. I hadn't seen anything so finely engineered outside of a top-end Swiss watch, except the scale was so much bigger. The quality of the mechanics was awesome. It was also beautiful. Everything was gilded, with wires running in stainless-steel channels encased in the body like human veins. Because Bailly is a perfectionist, he hasn't cut any corners, and he's using the finest materials and the finest craftsmen. He's in the tradition of the old makers, the 18th-century tradition of wizard craftsmen, and his ego won't let him sell it cheap." Start pauses, and says he wishes him luck. "There's a chance—he hasn't achieved it yet." •

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Photograph: courtesy of Jacob Frisard