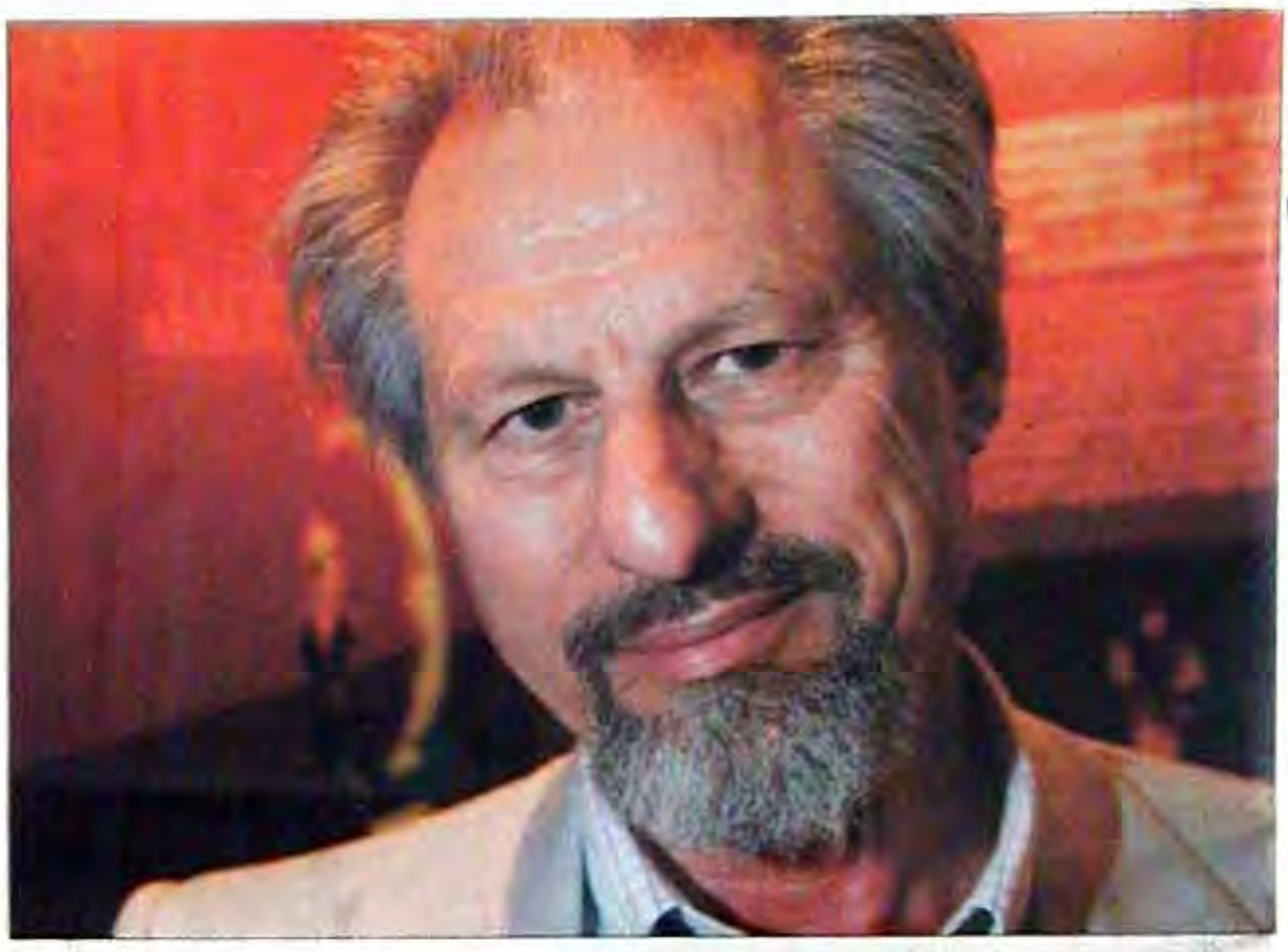
Life, but not as we know it

The intricate craft of automata is making a comeback. **Jennifer Duggan** meets a man with a passion for detail



An astonishing, tiny, colorful bird sits in the middle of the bright lights in the concourse of Ocean Terminal in Tsim Sha Tsui and opens its beak to produce a beautiful song. As it sings, it flaps its wings, unable to fly.

This is not a live creature, however. It is an exquisite imitation. Its creator, Christian Bailly, calls it magic. He also likes to create life, he says, or at least an imitation in the form of animated sculptures called automata.

Bailly creates and restores automata, which flowered in the 18th and 19th century in Europe into strikingly complicated clockwork models and decorations. France was the center of production.

Earlier versions, known as Jacquemart, were made as toys in the 17th century for the French aristocracy. They embodied the age and brought alive the gestures and fashions of the time.

Bailly gives the impression that he would like to have been part of the era, which he describes as a golden age in which automata, long before industrialization, television and radio, provided entertainment.

"Today, nothing surprises us," he says. "You press the buttons and everything works. But at that time, these creations were seen as magic. To have the power to make them move — that was magic."

The singing bird, so small and intricate it is hard to believe it was made by human hands, is part of an ornate timepiece of enamel and gold attached to an ebony cane. Although it is only a few centimeters tall, it is made up of 58 parts. The bird can move its head, beak, tail and wings and sing a melody lasting for nearly half a minute.

More than 400 parts are hidden in the ornate feature at the top of the cane. This work of art has been described by an expert as special enough to defy any rational pricing.

An animated picture that Bailly restored is also on display, a clock with three monkeys under it dressed in 18th century clothing playing tiny violins from which variously issue four different tunes.

Automata incorporating clocks were especially popular and were considered a mark of wealth.

Bailly is a very serious man. But, speaking in his liquid French accent about his creations, it becomes obvious he is also very passionate.

"I love this subject like it was my girlfriend," he says.

He fell in love 40 years ago, he explains, when he saw his first automaton. It was a model of an organ player.

"I was very surprised that someone could make something like that," he recalls.

"I wanted to buy it but didn't have enough money. But some years later I saw another one and this time I had the money. That is how I started to collect automata, one by one."

Bailly was as fascinated by the models' creators as he was by the objects. He has written two books, *Automata: The Golden Age 1848-1914*, published in 1987, and *Flights of Fancy*, published in 2001.

"It is my disease to collect them," he says. He became particularly fascinated with Jacob Frisard, one of the most important artisans at the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th century. Born in France, Frisard specialized in making birds and invented the system to make them sing.

Frisard and his work were so inspirational, Bailly says, that he adopted the name Frisards for his own brand of modern figures.

"In my research for my second book, I learned more about him and discovered he was a genius," Bailly says. "I liked his work, he made the most ingenious pieces. I would like to be a bit like him and to continue his tradition and also use new technology."

It is also partly his own love of birds, both real and mechanical, that makes Bailly a devotee of Frisard's work.

"The song of a bird is a charm of life," he says.

It was just six years ago that Bailly decided to build his own automata. It had taken years of study and research to be able to undertake the project and resulted in what he considers his masterpiece, *L'Oiseleur* or *The Bird Trainer*.

Made of 2,336 parts, *The Bird Trainer* has been described as the most important modern automaton — and the most expensive. The device took a team of 12 craftsmen 15,000 hours to make. It costs approximately HK$50 million.





"It was a big challenge to create. I had to redefine the technology of the 19th century," he says. "Today the techniques are very different. It was difficult to find people who specialize in the techniques that were needed."

The two birds in the piece, one on the trainer's head and the other in his hand, are composed of 62 parts that move in tune with music from a flute the figure plays.

The trainer himself is clothed in a costume made from 19th-century antique materials and stands on a mother-of-pearl case. His eyes are designed in such a way that they imitate the color and appearance of human eyes.

Bailly talks about his collection as if they are alive, and perhaps for him they are. He refers to each model as "he," never as an "it" or a "thing." He even goes so far as to compare *The Bird Trainer* to his children.

"It is my creation, he says. "I have four children but this — it is me, my creation."

To say collecting automata is an expensive hobby is an understatement. When asked about the price of his own creations, Bailly simply says you can't put a number on it. But he is quick to say he isn't in it for the money.

"I am not a businessman," he says. "I make them because I love them."

Many are made to order but he will only create an automaton, he says, if he likes the person. His notable customers include the actor Dustin Hoffman, the movie director Steven Spielberg and the magician David Copperfield.

This is the first time automata have been exhibited in Hong Kong or China. They are being promoted here at least partly because Christie Wo, the president of Fatty-Fatty Holdings, met Bailly at the Basel Fair in Switzerland earlier this year and became fascinated both by the objects and Bailly's passion.

She persuaded him to bring some of his collection to Hong Kong. They will be on exhibition until Sunday in Ocean Terminal, when they will be moved to the Ritz-Carlton Hotel and will be joined by three additional pieces for a two-day private exhibition by invitation.

Among the additional pieces is one called the *Writing Pierrot*, in which a figure, Pierrot, writes as long as an oil lamp is lit. When he sleeps the light is turned off and when he wakes he moves his hand to turn it on. *An Acrobat Clown*, Bailly's creation, which will join the private exhibition, is a figure of a 90cm clown balancing in a headstand on chairs, and then moving to lift one chair and then another.

Bailly's collections have been exhibited in France, Belgium, Japan, Britain and the United States. His own creations are sold privately. He has also sold around 500 antiques, some which he has restored himself.

"You don't find them easily," he says. "One I found in Mexico, one in Argentina. I bought some in Italy, in America and Spain. Each piece is unique and beautiful. Like a woman, every woman is unique. None is the same."