Genius of mechanical art

Christian Bailly is a man whose greatest love is mechanical toys. But these are more than toys, so intricate and so artistic, they are mechanized works of art. For 40 years he has traveled the world, researching and collecting these superbly artist machines.





Photo: Simon Song

After so many years of collecting automata, it was only six years ago he decided to build one. It had taken years of study and research to be able to undertake the project and resulted in what he called The Bird Trainer.

"It was a big challenge to create. I had to redefine the technology of the 19th Century," he said. "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 alone are composed of 62 parts that move in time with the flute the trainer plays.

The whole piece has a total of 2,336 parts, took 12 people some 15,000 hours to make -and it cost HK$50 million.

These works of art are called automata, which is the Latin plural for automaton. It means something that looks like a live creature but is not - yet it can move itself in a life-like way.

In the 19th Century, from around 1848 to 1914, these automata were extremely popular - at least for those who could afford them. Best customers were the French aristocracy.

Christian Bailly fell in love with automata 40 years ago, the first time he saw one. 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."

He became particularly fascinated with Jacob Frisard, a 19th Century craftsman who specialized in making birds and invented the system to make them sing.

"In my research for my second book, I learned about him and discovered he was a genius," Bailly says.

Bailly will build an automata to order, but he still collects antique ones, and his collection is exhibited around the world.

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."

To say that collecting automata is an expensive hobby is an understatement. When asked about the price of his own creations, Bailly simply says you cannot put a number on it. But he is quick to say he does not do it for the money.

"I am not a businessman," he says. "I make them because I love them." And he will only make an automaton if he likes the customer. Customers he liked include Dustin Hoffman, Steven Spielberg and David Copperfield.