# tall stories

Saturday 13 March – Sunday 25 April 2010

We are all familiar with stories; children's bedtime stories, adventure stories, romantic stories, detective stories, myths, sagas, comic book stories and fairy stories. A story, as defined in a dictionary, is a piece of narrative of any length, real or fictitious, told or printed in prose or verse. But we know that stories can be told in other ways. Pictures tell stories and objects tell stories. The radio series 'A History of the World in 100 Objects', a collaboration between the BBC and the British Museum, uses objects of ancient art, industry, technology and arms, to shine a light on human history.

This exhibition, *Tall Stories,* curated by the Devon Guild's Exhibitions Officer, Saffron Wynne, explores the potential of contemporary craft to tell stories through interactive automata and sculpture with a large dash of humour and intrigue. Some of our previous exhibitions have included work with a strong narrative element but in Saffron's words, *'we have never had an exhibition in which the sole focus is on narrative pieces. There are many skilled and imaginative makers currently working in this field.'*

The stories which the exhibits 'tell' encompass Bible stories, nursery rhymes, dark fairy tales, folklore and mythology, day-to day activities, stories of science and medicine, raucous parakeets and the previously undiscovered worlds of two new species, Folke and Tin Voles. There are hidden stories about the decline of the manufacturing industry, memories of long-ago childhoods and the stories of the materials themselves. Just imagine the story that a piece of re-cycled wood or tin might tell! Robert Race is eloquent in imagining the past of his salvaged driftwood. *'It was part of a boat (who knows where that has been), or a harbour defence, or merely a fruit box or a scrubbing brush; it was a floating home for marine plants and animals.'* Well, now that Robert has found it and transformed it again, it's a perky bird endlessly chasing an elusive bee. The exciting thing about stories told by objects is that the viewer is free to contribute to the narrative.

Several of our exhibitors refer to their work as being concerned with the everyday. Edwina Bridgeman uses found and discarded materials to make her 'ordinary' pieces extraordinary. On close inspection the leopard (who lies down with the kid) is an old reel of thread with black sequins and a very expressive face. Samantha Bryan, although she creates fairies, shows her characters going about their ordinary, every-day fairy lives. She invents aids to make her fairies lives easier so we have a fairy with a buoyancy aid and another with a bottom warming invention. Andy Hazell makes characters who *'work in low-level admin, eat frozen meals for one and dream of international espionage, casinos and speedboats.'* His voles, a sociable species who struggle with certain concepts, are quite good at getting things wrong.

Jan Zalud's expressive, beautifully carved pieces are deceptively simple. With a nodding head on one side and a shaking head on the other, 'Middle Man' sits between the 'yes' and the 'no' looking bewildered and unsure. 'Helluva Guy' has a finely muscled body and handsome features but when he moves he has the silliest walk. Jan's background is in puppet carving which he refined over time and then, in another jump forwards, began to automate. His main material is wood and his wood of choice for the carved parts of the work is lime. *'Lime wood is very close-grained so it picks up detail.'*

So what is it about automata? It is too simple to describe them as toys for grown-ups. They make us laugh, some pieces make us exclaim with their ingenuity and some, the teeny cow who jumps over the tiny moon, has an element of magic. And that is the point. There is wonder in man-made, moving objects and even in our age of sophisticated technology, we are still fascinated by the simple mechanisms which animate the pieces.

Amanda Popham's ceramic sculptures are from the world of myth and dark fairytales. Mrs. Gertrude, with her flaming head, is the title and a character from a Grimm's fairytale. The story begins, *'Once upon a time there was a little girl. She was obstinate and wilful and did not obey her parents when they spoke to her. What good can come to such a child?'* Clearly, no good at all as, when the child investigates a firey little old lady, she is revealed as the devil. The inquisitive child is then turned into a log of wood and thrown on the fire. She really *should* have listened to her parents and not gone out on her own! The three women hanging by their hair are rescued by Jack on one of his giant-killing expeditions. The poor ladies were strung up by their pony tails for refusing to eat their murdered husbands. How children's stories have changed over the years!

So here is the Devon Guild's collection of tales; not written, but as descriptive, detailed and animated as any prose. The makers, moved by stories they have heard, or ones they have made up themselves, have carved, whittled, drilled, knitted, modelled, bent, soldered, glued, balanced, geared, grouted, glazed, stitched, knitted and assembled their stories for the entertainment and delight of you, the audience.

**A brief automated history:**

Making Automata is difficult. Making other sorts of three dimensional objects can also be hard, but the extra dimension of movement seems to add a disproportionate amount of difficulty. Moving parts involve principles (physics not morals), levers, shafts, cranks, cams, springs, linkages, ratchets, drives and gearing. No wonder some of our makers have built whole, imaginary worlds around their pieces.

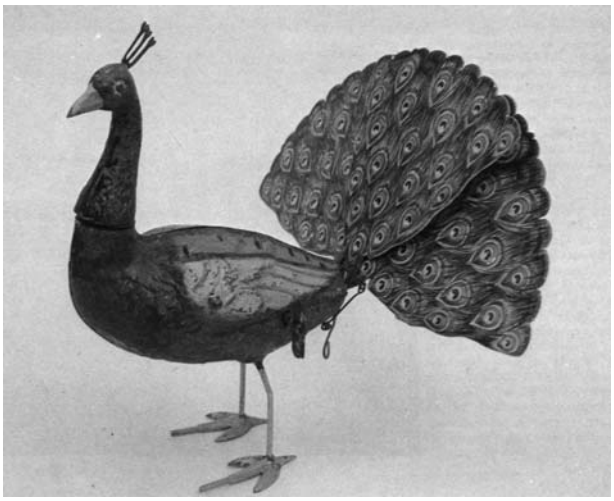
Automata and man-made moving objects have a long history. Ancient Egyptian tombs (2000BC) have been found to contain small figurines with movable limbs. Ancient Greek puppets, as described by Plato[1], were intricate enough to have moving mouths and eyes as well as limbs. Articulated masks exist from ancient times so universally that we could conclude that humans have always been actors. However, it's far more likely that moving masks were used to inspire awe and perhaps fear, imbuing the wearer with great power. Similarly, emulating living things is common throughout the ancient world. In Greek mythology, Hephaestus (also known as Vulcan in Ancient Rome), the god of mechanical arts and all craftsmen, made two female statues from pure gold. These golden girls accompanied and helped him wherever he went.

Much later (400BC) Archytas, said to be the inventor of the screw and the pulley, is reputed to have made a wooden pigeon which simulated flight. The pigeon was suspended from the end of a pivot and moved by means of a jet of water.

Moving on to the fifteenth century, Leonardo da Vinci apparently made a mechanical lion in honour of King Louis XII. The lion advanced towards the king, stopped and opened its own chest with its claw. Then it pointed to the fleur-de-lis, coat of arms of France.

The eighteenth century saw some spectacular ingenuity with novelty mechanical figures, musical cigar stands and the like. Singing birds, musical instrument players and fantastical clocks were all the preserve of skilled craftsmen.

[1] Plato: 427BC – 348BC



Clockwork tin peacock c.1900

Faberge made several eggs with automata inside. In 1908 he made 'a crystal and gold egg containing a little peacock, beautiful in brilliant blue enamel with greenish tail feathers. When wound the bird struts forward and displays his tail feathers.'

Children's toys, in particular walking, talking, articulated dolls were a goal which resulted in surprising innovations. In 1832, the scientist David Brewster foresaw that 'before another century is completed, a talking and singing machine will be numbered among the conquests of science.'[2] In 1877 Thomas Edison experimented with a machine to record the dots and dashes of Morse Code. This led to him patenting the phonograph – a speech recorder, and miniature versions of the phonograph were soon incorporated into dolls bodies.

The nineteenth and early twentieth century was the heyday for metal clockwork toys, small and large-scale. Seaside and pier attractions included mechanical 'haunted house' and 'ghost-train' attractions. After the First World War, plastic changed the face of toy manufacturing. Now we have robots capable of assembling robots so it's not surprising that the manifestations of an artist's imagination are as appealing as ever and perhaps the relative 'simplicity' of contemporary automata, plus the narrative element, makes the genre all the more appealing.

Walking doll with baby carriage, 1858.



[2] Mary Hillier. *Automata and Mechanical Toys, An illustrated History*. Jupiter, 1976.