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# Koopman Rare Art

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## **The Koopman Rare Art Illustrated Directory of Gold & Silver – Timo Koopman**

With Frieze Masters fast approaching in October and so many of our friends returning after their summer break, I thought this would be the perfect opportunity to introduce our new monthly article that will run alongside our weekly Director's Choice.

We will be covering the Alphabet, this will include some of our most special pieces past and present while also exploring the virtuosity, ability, and techniques employed by the finest gold and silversmiths to achieve these treasures that are handed down to the next generation of fortunate custodians.

We start the journey with one of our latest acquisitions: An exquisite Swiss gold automaton musical box, amongst the finest gold boxes ever to grace our collection.

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## **A is for Automaton**



**A Swiss Enamelled Four-Colour Gold Tightrope Dancer Automaton Musical Box**

The automaton, Geneva, circa 1780. The box with makers mark 'M & P under crown',

The box Hanau, circa 1780. - Collection of Koopman Rare Art

The box is oval in form and chased in four-colour gold. The base is decorated with a trophy of musical instruments in a gallery hung with flowers festoons, foliage, and a chandelier. The sides are with four musical trophies in reserves hung with pierced garlands and divided by columns pierced for sound with chevrons, and rosettes. The top of the box is with a hinged glass cover and the automaton centred by a tightrope dancer in tutu and feathered hat framed by a columned alcove hung with laurel swags and flanked by vases of flowers above foliate scrolls. The ground partly enamelled in sky blue, green and marbled and the base hinged for the key compartment. The start and stop buttons are incorporated in the design of the side of the box and the movement hinged into the case, skeletonized and finished in gilt metal and polished steel with a five-bell musical carillon. The box marked in the cover and compartment and comes together with a key and a fitted silk case.



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### **Geneva, Centre of Production of Watch and Automaton Movements**

Since the Middle Ages, Geneva was renowned for its goldsmithing and as a Calvinist city had welcomed all protestants including many talented Huguenot goldsmiths and tradesmen attached to the profession. In

1789, although Geneva was seemingly small with a population of around 26,000, La Fabrique, as the watch and jewellery trade was known, employed around 5000 people working together in a very loose self-regulating guild system which simplified the profession and commerce.

In the 18th century members of the Fabrique worked with a middleman called an *établisseur* who not only supplied the raw materials but also sold the finished movements to *négotiants* (merchants) who would sell them on abroad (p. 63 J. Clarke, 2014). Of course, larger structures were able to sell their own goods directly. The 1780s were thus prosperous years for Geneva with an increased production of movements, automata sometimes retailed raw all over Europe or sold in elaborately decorated boxes supplied by the local talented goldsmiths and intended for the European, but especially Ottoman and Chinese markets.

The Chinese were believed to consider pairs to be lucky and particularly liked pieces with automaton, musical movements or watches. Hence pieces made for China, were often brightly enamelled and included a complicated element. These were then exported on perilous routes to be presented at fairs or potential clients. In some cases, they came back to Geneva where the pairs were then sold separately.

Few examples of pairs have survived, the best documented is that of singing bird boxes, with movement by Jaquet-Droz & Leschot, the cases by Guidon, Rémond, Gide & Co., dated 1800-1801 ordered by the London retail jewellers David Duval & Co. Who like James Cox specialised in sending elaborate mechanical novelties to China. (See the image below).



Our automaton is identical and we believe is the pair to the one in the Gilbert Collection now in the Victoria & Albert Museum, (Acc. No. LOAN: GILBERT.383-2008) previously in the collection of Henry Ford II sold in 1978. This suggests that it may have been conceived as a pair to be sold in China. Both carry this maker's mark M&P under crown often seen on musical boxes.

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#### **A Hanau Maker:**

Despite Lorenz Seelig's research (op. Cit. 2014) which cleared out the historical misattribution of Hanau pieces to Geneva, many goldsmiths are still unidentified. However, Seelig showed that there was a strong bond between the two cities who not only 'exchanged' makers, such as the famous Jean George Rémond working in Geneva but born and trained in Hanau, but also had an active commerce. Interestingly Sotheby's presented in New York, 23 October 2006 under lot 124 a similar automaton box marked Augustin-André Héguin, Paris, 1786 or 1787 but unenamelled and with slightly different chased motifs. This helps to confirm that in both instances the movement as well as the automaton figure were made in Geneva but that the gold box was made by a local maker.



*Detail on the reverse side of the automaton musical box*

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### **Tightrope Dancing:**

Tightrope dancing exists since Antiquity although it remained confined to the fairs until the second half of the 18th century when it entered theatres. Indeed, it took London and Paris by storm certainly because of the enthusiasm of the kings and the Courts for the discipline; even the comte d'Artois (the future Charles X) took lesson and was apparently quite talented.

By the 18th century, circus and dance influenced each other so that the tightrope dancer became assimilated to a ballerina with tutu while wearing plumes as a headgear in the tradition of saltimbanque and circus performers. In Paris, the Grands-Danseurs et Sauteurs du Roy (the Great Dancers and Jumper of the King), founded in 1753 by Jean-Baptiste Nicolet (1687-1762), comprised actors, dancers and agility artists in equal numbers who received a royal privilege in 1772, and thereby became incredibly famous.

By the end of the 18th century, rope dancing had transformed into a "high wire act" and was an important act in stage shows. It was theatrical, providing opportunities for sequence of skits with dramatic postures, costumes and accessories. Performers such as Signora Violante (1682-1741), Marina Rossi (fl. 1768-1776) Madame Saqui (1786-1866) to name a few, all contributed to transform tightrope walking into a theatrical performance. Its popularity in high society certainly explained that the figure was used to create an automaton.

### **Comparative Literature:**

- J. Clarke, Swiss Gold Boxes: Myth or Reality in Going for Gold, Craftmanship and Collecting of Gold Boxes, in Going for Gold, Craftmanship and Collecting of Gold Boxes, 2014, p. 61-73.
- L. Seelig, Gold Box Production in Hanau: The Extended Workbench of Frankfurt and its Trade Fair in Going for Gold, Craftmanship and Collecting of Gold Boxes, 2014, p. 74-91.
- A. Chapuis and E. Gélis, Le monde des automates: Etude historique et technique. 2 vols. Paris, 1928. III. 326.
- G. Von Habsburg-Lothringen, Gold boxes from the collection of Rosalinde and Arthur Gilbert, 1983. 125 p., ill. Cat. No. 2, p. 21. Important English & Continental Silver & Objects of Vertu. Sotheby's, New York, October 23, 2006 (N08236). Lot 124, pp. 78-81.
- C. Truman, The Gilbert Collection of Gold Boxes, Vol. I. Los Angeles (Los Angeles County Museum of Art) 1991, cat. No. 121, pp. 348-9.
- T. Schroder, ed. The Gilbert Collection at the V&A. London (V&A Publishing) 2009, p. 61, plate 46.
- H. Zech, Gold Boxes. Masterpieces from the Rosalinde and Arthur Gilbert Collection. London: V&A Publishing, 2015, pp. 128-129, no. 46.
- T. Schroder, Gold boxes: from the Gilbert collection: an exhibition, Los Angeles : Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1986.

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### **Automata and their history:**

Few examples of automatons were made prior to the 16th century remain, but numerous documents record their onetime existence. Among the earliest references is to a wooden model of a pigeon constructed by Archytas of Tarentum (flourished 400–350 bce), a Greek friend of Plato. The bird was apparently suspended from the end of a pivoted bar, and the whole apparatus revolved by means of a jet of steam or compressed air. Accounts of automatons in China date from as early as the 3rd century BCE, during the Han dynasty, when a mechanical orchestra was made for the emperor. In the Islamic world there were several inventors active from about the 9th century. Best-documented are the water-operated automatons, many of moving peacocks, invented and made by al-Jazarī, who worked in the 13th century for princes of the Artuqid dynasty in Mesopotamia.



*Ship of Charles V" (Musée de Cluny, Paris)*

With the use of coiled tempered-steel spring from the mid-15th century, a truly portable source of motion became available in the Renaissance. It was used, for instance, in some of the nefs, table ornaments in the form of sailing ships. Largely dating from the second half of the 16th century, nefs probably originated in the gold- and silversmithing centres of Germany, namely Augsburg and Nürnberg, with such important masters of mechanical construction and the jeweller's craft as Hans Schlottheim. Among the most celebrated nefs is the "Ship of Charles V" (Musée de Cluny, Paris).

It was in the late 18th and early 19th centuries that the most intricate automatons made their appearance. Typical are the objects made by the Rochat brothers, who specialized in the manufacture of miniature singing birds. The mechanical songbirds were devised to appear suddenly from beneath hinged panels in snuffbox tops or to operate in cages that were suspended so that a clock under the base was visible.

One extraordinary automaton was 'The Silver Swan'. It was first recorded in 1774 as a crowd puller in the Mechanical Museum of James Cox, the famous London jeweller and 18th century entrepreneur. The internal mechanism designed by John Joseph Merlin, a famous inventor of the time, is an intricate clock like mechanism that powers the delicate movements of the Swan's neck. James Cox was so acclaimed after making the Silver Swan, that he was asked by the Russian

court to create a bespoke automaton to adorn their parties. Hence, the famous Peacock Clock, now hosted by the Hermitage Museum, was created.

The beautiful Silver Swan has a similar story, it was demanded by royalty that ended up changing their minds. The Swan never sailed away to faraway lands, remaining in the UK to be exhibited in the 'Spring Garden', James Cox's curiosities museum. In mid-19th century, jeweller Harry Emanuel, who must have been in the possession of the Silver Swan at the time, exhibited it in the famous Paris International Exhibition.



*Drawing of the Silver Swan Automaton at the Paris International Exhibition*

With the exception of a few works by Peter Carl Fabergé, the production of costly artistic automatons virtually ceased in the late 19th and early 20th centuries because of the diminishing number of skilled craftsmen as well as rich patrons to support them. Collecting these treasures is therefore reserved for only the most wealthy.



*Fabergé's automaton Sedan Chair*

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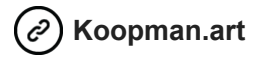
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All works shown, unless otherwise indicated, are available to view and purchase in our gallery located in 12 Dover Street, London, W1S 4LL

For all enquiries please do not hesitate to call or email on:

020 7242 7624 / [info@koopman.art](mailto:info@koopman.art)





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12 Dover Street  
W1S 4LL, London  
United Kingdom

Phone: +44 20 7242 7624

Email: [info@koopman.art](mailto:info@koopman.art)

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