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# Musical Machines & Living Dolls

by Scott Briggs

Project Manager and Senior Associate, Museum Services  
The Murtoth D. Guinness Collection  
with

Lee H. Skolnick Architecture + Design Partnership  
New York, NY



Nineteenth century world's expositions inspired the design of this gallery. Thematic graphic panels explain the historical context of the objects on display. The exhibit features interactives such as where the user is asked to match the sound to the artifact.

The Morris Museum (Morristown, NJ), one of the largest cultural institutions in New Jersey, serving more than 200,000 visitors from across the region each year, celebrated two milestones.

The Museum unveiled the landmark exhibit "Musical Machines & Living Dolls," designed by Lee H. Skolnick Architecture + Design Partnership, New York, NY. It features the Murtoth D. Guinness Collection, a rare compilation of 700 mechanical musical instruments and automated figures. The striking new 33,000 square foot addition was

designed by RMJM Hillier, an architectural firm in Princeton, NJ, and blends the historic legacy of the Museum with a modern architectural approach.

Through video and audio technology, hands-on activities and live demonstrations of musical instruments, Skolnick's design for the exhibit brings more than 150 pieces of the Guinness Collection to life.

The challenge was to create a permanent display of more than 150 mechanical musical instruments and automata from the more than 700 objects in the Murtoth D. Guinness



Collection, one of the most significant of its kind in the world.

Largely dating to the 19th century, these ingenious objects once brought animated, musical entertainment to private settings and public spaces. Now, visitors can see and hear these beautiful and intriguing historic objects and experience for themselves a potentially lost chapter in entertainment history.

The primary goal of our design was to provide compelling entry points for the general visitor and collection connoisseur into the technological wonders and fascinating social history of the items in the collection, said Scott Briggs, exhibit project manager and senior associate.

The exhibit begins with an abstracted Victorian drawing room that serves as the setting for a six-minute orientation film. Upon leaving the theater, the Collection's largest piece, the Rex Orchestration, leads off the exhibit, where patrons are guided through:

- "Mechanical Universe" emphasizes the scientific and

technological aspects of the Collection. Taking its design cues from the spectacle of the enormous 19th century world's expositions that introduced these objects to the widest possible audience, displays use objects from the Collection to demonstrate how these items were powered, how they reproduced sound and how they held the "memory" of various musical compositions. Interactive stations and video footage throughout this gallery highlight the technology behind the objects on view.

- "Music Revolutions" captures the many facets of the Collection in a cultural and social historical context. A suite of displays show the objects grouped in settings from various eras. Changes in the style, size and sound quality of the instruments on view demonstrate the increasing popularity of these items as they were enjoyed initially by European royalty and aristocrats in mostly domestic settings, then increasingly found their way to the general public, including the American market, in larger venues such as beer halls, theaters and hotel lobbies. This section of the exhibit







expounds on the exhibit's main theme of "the democratization of music and reproducible sound" from the mid-eighteenth century to the dawn of the twentieth century.

- "Animated Worlds" shows off the craftsmanship and elaborate movements of the Collection's spectacular automata or mechanically animated figures. Many of these automata originated in the small workshops lining the alleyways of the Marais district in Paris. This area of the exhibit begins with an evocation of a Marais street and proceeds to a workshop interior where an interactive video display highlights the best of the Guinness automata. Around the gallery, the automata themselves are grouped thematically, such as the mechanical menagerie in "Animal Kingdom" and the colorful circus performers and mysterious snake charmers in "the Allure of the Exotic."

Due to the rarity and fragility of the objects in the Collection, only a handful of the items on display will be demonstrated by docents on a rotating basis. This posed the exhibit's greatest challenges – how to hear the wonderful

sound these mechanical musical instruments make, and how to show the whimsical movements of the automata to the general public. To resolve this dilemma, most of the items on display have audio recordings available at stations located throughout the exhibition. Additionally, many of the objects appear in video displays that allow visitors a closeup view of the inner workings of these beautifully crafted instruments, as well as reveal the charms of the Collection's animated figures.

A "Workshop" area concludes the visitors' experience of the Guinness Collection with exhibits designed especially for the Morris Museum's family and school-age audiences. All exhibits in this area are designed to be interactive. Visitors can create their own music by "pinning" and then turning the cylinder of an oversize cylinder box, punch a special card and crank it through a player mechanism to hear their own custom tune, dance a few steps in time to a song from the jukebox timeline, or take a seat on a special child-sized "musical chair" that replicates an object from





Large format, layered graphics and stainless steel signage flanking the entrance to the exhibition introduce collector Murtoth D. Guinness. A video highlights objects from the Collection.

the Collection. Colorful graphics and natural lighting make this a welcoming space for visitors of all ages to explore this unique Collection in a hands-on manner.

### A Museum Revealed

Designed by RMJM Hillier, the new wing – with more than 20,000 square feet of renovation and new construction – brings old and new together, joining the Museum's largest artifact – its home, a historic 1913 mansion designed by famed American architecture firm McKim Mead & White – to the highly regarded Bickford Theatre. A modern intervention that uses high-tech materials and finishes to blend with the historic architecture of the Museum, the new addition successfully creates an environment where old and new can comfortably co-exist.

It all begins with a new Grand Entrance Pavilion. With slatted redwood screen wall outside and modern glass panels and steel accents inside, the Pavilion welcomes visitors to the Museum, while also serving as an open event space, home to a new museum shop and connector to the Museum's Bickford Theatre.

Once inside, the visitor is drawn to a new two-story, sunlit Atrium at the 'heart' of the Museum, featuring the modern entrance to the centerpiece "Musical Machines & Living Dolls" exhibit and newly revealed and restored facade of the historic mansion.

"Now old and new come together in a very direct way,"

said Roger Smith, an associate at RMJM Hillier and the senior designer for the Museum project. "Opposite walls of glass and steel, the Museum's historic architecture is now an active part of the museum experience and sets the stage for the innovative "Musical Machines & Living Dolls" exhibit."

In addition, the new wing provides the Museum with additional gallery space above the Guinness exhibit as well as a viewable storage and resource center for the Guinness Collection, opening in 2008, further enhancing its diverse educational mission. *eb*

### Project Consultants/Suppliers

Client: Morris Museum, Morristown, NJ

Executive Director, Morris Museum: Steven H. Miller

Curator for the Guinness Collection: Ellen M. Snyder-Grenier

Conservator for the Guinness Collection: Jeremie Ryder

Owner's Project Representative: Richard Rose

Exhibit Design: Lee H. Skolnick Architecture + Design Partnership, New York, NY

Architectural Design: RMJM Hillier, Princeton, NJ

Exhibit Fabrication: 1220 Exhibits, Nashville, TN

General Contractor: Del-Sano Construction, Inc., Union, NJ

Lighting Design: Fisher Marantz Stone, New York, NY

Audio/Visual Design and Production: Russell Brosnahan Haffner Multimedia, Inc., Dobbs Ferry, NY

Conservation Consultant: Autamusique, Ltd., Summit, NJ

Paints: Benjamin Moore; Ronan Paints (metallics)

Laminates: Wilsonart

Carpet: Lees

Floor coverings: Armstrong; LG Floors

Wall base: Burke Mercer

Theatrical Drapery: Rose Brand

Wall fabric: Through Peachtree Fabrics, Inc.

Scenic painting: Wet Paint Studios/Steven Dews

Lighting track and fixtures: LSI