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A New Home for a Fanciful Collection to Play In Clowns, Peacocks and Other Mechanical Pieces Come to Life With Music

By CHRISTOPHER HANN

VISITORS entering the Morris Museum's new permanent exhibition of mechanical musical instruments will first come face to face with the Rex Orchestrion, a mammoth contraption designed to replicate an entire orchestra. Built by Popper & Company of Leipzig, Germany, about 1915, it stands nearly 10 feet high and 6 feet wide. Behind its ornate oak facade, the Rex contains a piano, bass and snare drums, organ pipes, orchestra bells, a xylophone and a glockenspiel — all powered by compressed air. It is an imposing example of Old World craftsmanship kicking off an ambitious exhibition.

Next month, the museum will open a \$10 million, 4,300-square-foot wing constructed principally to display the Rex Orchestrion and nearly 700 other pieces in the collection of Murtoth D. Guinness. The exhibition opens to the public on Nov. 6. The collection includes dozens of so-called automata, mechanical figures designed to mimic a human or animal in motion, often with musical accompaniment. Clowns, minstrels, snake charmers, prancing peacocks — the Guinness automata take on many forms. A barrel organ shows Napoleon and Josephine dancing at a court ball; a nearly life-size flautist blinks his eyes and turns his head as he lifts the flute to his mouth and fingers the instrument.

The museum will present 150 objects at a time, with the rest on view behind glass walls in a basement storage area. In order to preserve the pieces, museum officials will allow only a 30-minute daily demonstration of a half-dozen objects to



Warren Westura for The New York Times

SHOW AND TELL Ellen Snyder-Grenier is the curator of the exhibition, which opens on Nov. 6 in a new wing at the Morris Museum.

be played on a rotating basis.

Mr. Guinness, an heir to the Anglo-Irish beer fortune, acquired his beloved musical pieces over more than 60 years preceding his death in January 2002 at 89. His will stipulated that the collection be donated to a museum with enough space to display it. The Morris Museum so coveted the collection, said Steven H. Miller, the executive director, that it issued a \$10 million bond through the New Jersey Economic Development Authority to build the new wing in time to meet a deadline imposed by the Guinness estate.

Built atop what had been a terrace at the center of the building, the wing is part of an 18-month renovation that includes new main entrances to the museum and to the adjoining Bickford Theater. RMJM

Hillier of Princeton designed the project, and Lee H. Skolnick Architecture and Design Partnership of New York City arranged the display of the collection.

The estate will contribute a seven-figure endowment — the precise amount has not been determined, Mr. Miller said — for the care of the collection. Meanwhile, the museum has begun a \$15 million fund-raising campaign to repay the bond and supplement its own endowment.

The collection represents the most important acquisition in the museum's 94-year history, Mr. Miller said.

"The quality of the collection that Mr. Guinness put together is by all accounts superb," Mr. Miller said. "He

had the time, the wherewithal, the means and the ability.”

The collection spans four centuries of European ingenuity but also includes meticulously crafted pieces made at the Regina Music Box Company in Rahway. The smallest item is an 18-karat gold ring made in Geneva circa 1802-1811. Depicting an animated scene of a musical session, the ring contains a quarter-inch-thick mechanism that plays *Le Ranz des Vaches* — roughly translated, Song of the Cows — an ancient herders’ ode to the Swiss motherland.

The largest piece is the Rex Orchestration, which would have been used in cafes and dance halls, said Ellen Snyder-Grenier, the collection’s curator, who called it “the original jukebox.”

The Morris Museum will house its Guinness Exhibition in a suite of displays designed to interpret the technological, social and cultural significance of mechanical instruments. A display titled “Music Revolution” explores how the growing popularity of music boxes in the late 19th century heralded what Mr. Miller called “the democratization of music.” Other displays focus on the manufacturing of automata in Paris in the 19th and early 20th centuries and the science and technology of the instruments. The “Workshop” display features hands-on activities for children.

“We’re in the show-and-tell business,” Mr. Miller said.



First made exclusively for the wealthy, mechanical instruments had become common in middle-class households by the close of the 19th century. The museum’s exhibition includes a sepia-tone photograph of a dour-looking Nebraska farm clan, circa 1888, posing for a family portrait with their organette, a small, square music box, placed before them on the dusty ground.

The story of how the collection found its home has a distinct New Jersey flavor. Mr. Guinness was a close friend of Hughes and Frances Ryder of Summit, local restaurateurs and fellow members of Music Box Society International. He was also a mentor to their sons, Steve and Jeremie Ryder, who later became authorities on mechanical instruments.

When Mr. Guinness died, Steve Ryder

notified the Morris Museum that his collection would be available, and he has been advising the museum on its presentation; Jeremie Ryder was later named its conservator.

Mr. Guinness kept his collection at his two Manhattan town houses, where he entertained visitors whose enthusiasm for it matched his own. His nephew, Desmond Guinness, in a telephone interview from his home near Dublin, recalled many “jolly evenings together.”

Desmond Guinness inherited one instrument from the collection and lent the piece, a 1907 German player piano with three violins known as a Phonoliszt-Violina, to the museum. “I love the idea that people will be able to enjoy it,” he said. “It was always my favorite.”