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EXHIBITION REVIEW

'The Art of Rube Goldberg' Review: The Machinery of Humor

The first survey of the cartoonist's work in nearly 50 years highlights the way his playful art captured the mechanics of society.



Rube Goldberg's 'I Never Thought of That (Portrait of Irma on Wedding Day)' (1916) PHOTO: RUBE GOLDBERG INC.

By *Edward Rothstein*

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Philadelphia

If, as the science-fiction writer Arthur C. Clarke once asserted, any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic, at “The Art of Rube Goldberg”—an entrancing new exhibition at the National Museum of American Jewish History—we see that any sufficiently antique technology can also be magical. The technology here is that of simple mechanics; the magic partly comes from it being used in Dadaist fashion. An automatic back-scratcher is constructed using an umbrella, a dwarf and a mallet. A fly swatter is activated using carbolic acid, a head of garlic and a trout. A method of escaping bill collectors assembles a tailor, a hatrack and a cabbage. And linking these elements are pulleys, ramps and levers.

Rube Goldberg contraptions, every one.

The Art of Rube Goldberg

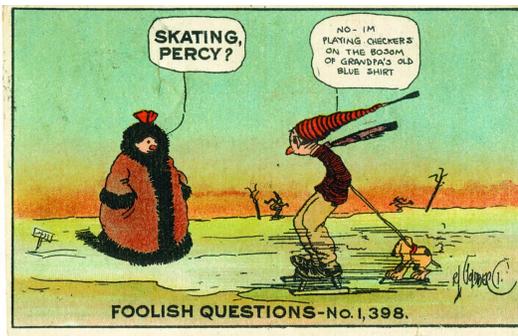
*National Museum of American Jewish History
Through Jan. 21, 2019*

Literally. But the cartoonist Rube Goldberg (1883-1970) reached such renown that his name entered the dictionary as an adjective in the 1960s: Rube Goldberg machines typically use extremely complex means to accomplish something simple. For 30 years there have also been competitions to create

working Rube Goldberg machines, which now inspire millions of views on YouTube. They use elementary parts and, like the cartoons, inspire amazement at the inventiveness, the absurdity of the project, and the incongruity of the result. There is a mild-mannered example at the show's entrance: You place a ball in a cup attached to a bicycle wheel and turn it until the ball falls, rolling down ramps and through gates, ultimately lighting a bulb and moving a pen across a sheet of paper: a rudimentary Rube Goldberg cartoon-making machine.

The difference is that Rube Goldberg never built his inventions; most are unbuildable. And this exhibition, said to be the first surveying his work since 1970, shows them as part of a career that produced some 50,000 cartoons of varied styles. Artifacts were gathered by his granddaughter Jennifer George, who also helped create a jam-packed book counterpart. The show was conceived by Creighton Michael; its curator is Max Weintraub. Designed to travel, after closing on Jan. 21 it will move to the Evansville Museum of Arts, History, & Science, in Indiana, and then to the Queens Museum, in New York. It includes drawings, toys, videos (including a snippet of

the first “Three Stooges” movie, which Goldberg worked on) and a play area in which children learn about ramps and levers and then move on to more elaborate constructions.

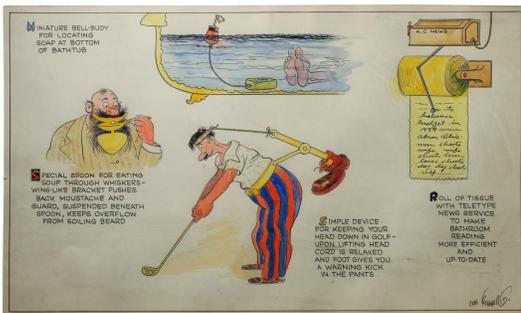


Rube Goldberg's 'Foolish Questions' postcard (c. 1910) PHOTO: RUBE GOLDBERG INC.

Rube, we learn in this largely chronological presentation, was the child of German-Jewish immigrant Max Goldberg—a “flamboyant” character who worked as a bank appraiser (his tools are shown) and was a “political operative” in San Francisco, becoming, as we see from his badge, Chief of Police. Rube had other interests; he executed an astonishing pen-

and-ink copy of a lithograph, “The Old Violinist,” in 1895, at the age of 12.

At his father’s insistence, he trained in mine engineering at the University of California at Berkeley, but artistry took over. He seemed to view the social world as a phantasmagorical mechanism, running on posture and pretense. One cartoon, “Amusement Park” (c. 1920), shows a roller coaster twisting wildly as figures and vehicles tumble off—an image, he implies, applicable both inside and outside the park. There are hints, too, of what must have been his considerable impatience. In a series of “Foolish Questions,” a person engaged in a perfectly obvious task is encountered by a too-inquisitive observer. “Pickin’ flowers, Lucy?” asks a passerby of a young woman gathering blossoms. “No, you simple-minded piece of cream cheese,” she replies, “I’m filling the coal scuttle with apple sauce.”



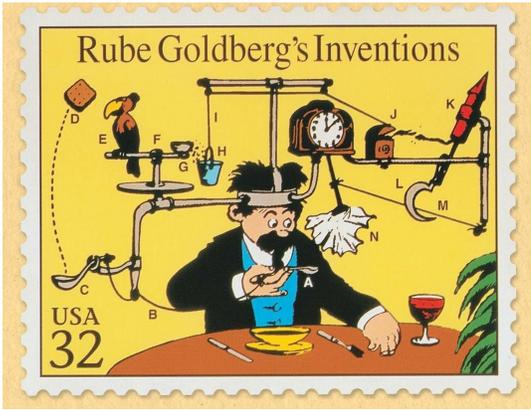
Rube Goldberg's 'Bell-Buoy, Soup Spoon, Golf' (c. 1938-41) PHOTO: RUBE GOLDBERG INC.

Not everything is that brittle; there are some tender images. The early cartoons are almost vaudevillian with marital jest, but in “I Never Thought of That (Portrait of Irma on Wedding Day)” (1916) he is a cigar-smoking cartoonist, dreamily dragged off by Cupid, as a photograph of his wife-to-be, Irma

Seeman, rises above in a cloud of cigar smoke.

But Goldberg’s imagining of the social world’s machinery, playfulness, imagination and cynicism accompany one another. In a 1923 Popular Science article, he mentions his idea for a folding umbrella: “I still have hopes of inventing something useful.” But his cartoon inventions really mock invention. And he himself hardly needed any of them. By the 1920s, he was immensely wealthy, earning \$125,000 in 1928 (more than \$1.7 million today). He threw grand parties in his New York mansion; a photo shows him beaming in a group that includes George Gershwin and Groucho Marx.

What then is the contemporary allure of these mechanisms? In part, they remind the Technorati of their past. Today, you can’t tell how anything works by looking at it; there often are no moving parts. The Rube Goldberg extravaganzas on YouTube are celebrations of the opposite: Everything moves and everything is visible. But the cartoons are more surreal: They are impossible. They often include exotic creatures (a monkey, a seal, caterpillars). People (a stenographer, a “boss,” a hapless husband) are also entwined in the chain reaction. These machines were satirical images of a world in which invention seemed to promise transformation, yet engulfed the human. Created between the eras of Sinclair Lewis and F. Scott Fitzgerald—a tumultuous period of aspiration, industrialization, social realignment and urban enterprise—these inventions were partly counter-images to the American dream. The irony is that they were fashioned with such love and care, they have survived as celebrations of



United States Postal Service stamp of 'Rube Goldberg's Inventions' PHOTO: RUBE GOLDBERG INC.

it.

—*Mr. Rothstein is
the Journal's Critic
at Large.*

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