

## Grandfather of invention: Art of Rube Goldberg on view in Philadelphia

Fred B. Adelson, Special to the Cherry Hill Courier-Post Published 5:53 p.m. ET Oct. 31, 2018 | Updated 5:56 p.m. ET Oct. 31, 2018



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The spectator at ringside sees a wrestler on the mat and asks: "Is he down?"

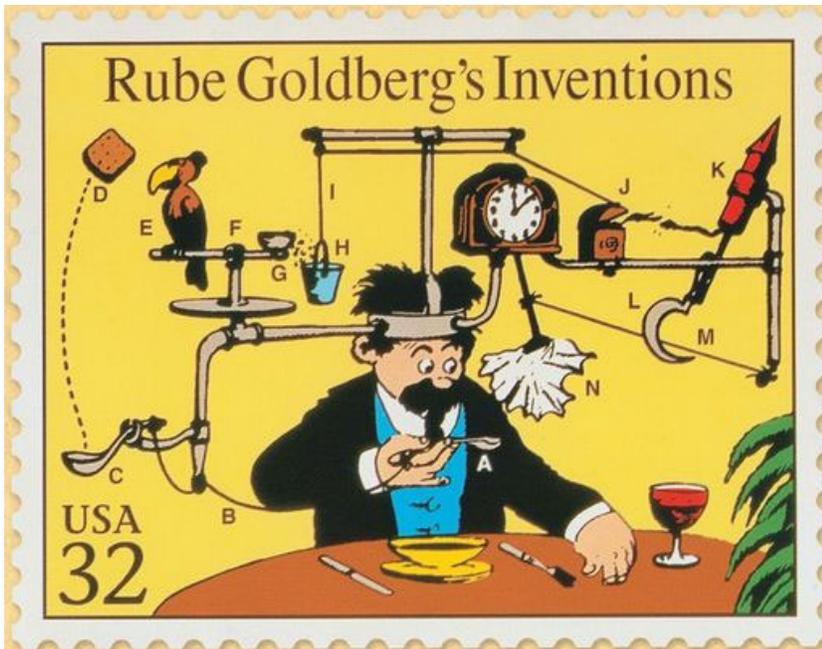
The sports fan is told: "No, he wants to change his luck, and he's looking for a four-leaf clover."

A book discusses "How to Remove the Cotton from a Bottle of Aspirin and other Problems Solved."

Buttons announces: "I'm the Guy that put the C in Ocean," and "I'm the Guy that put the ale in Yale."

Moreover, a professor proudly demonstrates a machine that adheres a stamp on an envelope as well as one that is an intricately sequenced self-operating napkin system.

Such amusing and rather wacky creative concepts are quintessential Rube (Rueben Lucius) Goldberg (1883-1970), one of the most popular and successful cartoonists of the 20th century. Since the late 1920s, Goldberg's name has been part of our lexicon. According to Merriam-Webster, Rube Goldberg is an adjective defined as "accomplishing by complex means what seemingly could be done simply."



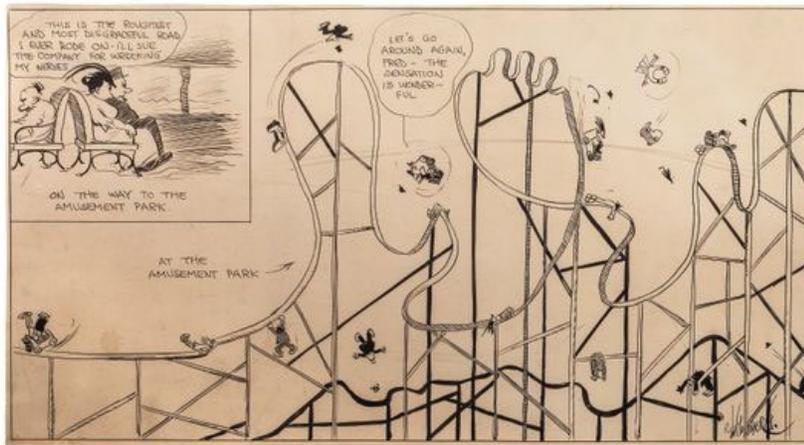
Rube Stamp: 'Rube Goldberg's Inventions' is a United States Postal Service stamp (included on sheet of "Comic Classics" stamps), date unknown. (Photo: Copyright © Rube Goldberg Inc. All Rights Reserved. RUBE GOLDBERG © is a registered trademark of Rube Goldberg Inc. All materials used with permission. [www.rubegoldberg.com](http://www.rubegoldberg.com))

"The Art of Rube Goldberg" at the National Museum of American Jewish History, an affiliate of the Smithsonian Institution on Independence Mall in Philadelphia, looks at the significant career of Goldberg, who is largely associated with "ludicrously ridiculous 'inventions.' "

"As a history museum, we are very pleased to be able to present the man behind the machine and excited to realize how much he still means to so many," said Josh Perelman, the museum's curator and director of exhibitions.

On view here until Jan. 21, this is the first comprehensive exhibit since the artist's death nearly 50 years ago. After Philadelphia, the show will go to the Evansville Museum of Arts, History, and Science (April 28 to July 21, 2019) in Indiana, and then complete its three-year national touring schedule at the Queens Museum of Art in New York from Oct. 12, 2019 to February 16, 2020.

In collaboration with Jennifer George, the artist's granddaughter and legacy director of Rube Goldberg, Inc., this delightfully appealing exhibit was guest curated by Max Weintraub, gallery director at the Herron School of Art and Design of Indiana University, who selected approximately 90 objects: original drawings that have never been publicly displayed and are still owned by the family, published comic strips, photographs, video clips, commercial products and sundry personal items.



**Rube (Rueben Lucius) Goldberg (1883-1970), one of the most popular and successful cartoonists of the 20th century. Goldberg's 'Amusement Park' was created circa 1920. It is an ink work on paper. (Photo: Copyright © Rube Goldberg Inc. All Rights Reserved. RUBE GOLDBERG ® is a registered trademark of Rube Goldberg Inc. All materials used with permission. <http://www.rubegoldberg.com>.)**

Jennifer George reminisced about "Grandpa Rube in a telephone conversation from her home in New York. "He speaks to the human condition," she said. "He drew funny and thought funny."

She acknowledged, "her memories are seen through the prism of a child" but distinctly recalls that her grandfather "enjoyed being the center of attention and always was laughing."

John George, 74, of Blawenburg, Somerset County, who described himself "like a third son," recalls spending many weekends and summers with his grandparents. He remarked by phone how "Rube" was definitely "a celebrity in public, but at home was warm, loving, attentive and generous."

Goldberg is now being reclaimed for a new generation who are not familiar with the full breadth of his art that gave birth to such legendary comic characters as Boob McNutt, Lala Palooza, Mike and Ike (They Look Alike) and Professor Lucifer Gorgonzola Butts.

It is estimated that Goldberg completed approximately 50,000 cartoon drawings dating from the early 1900s. Through syndication, his cartoons were distributed nationally, establishing a significant reputation that is often unmentioned in art history.

In his day, Goldberg was truly an artist-celebrity. His product endorsements and licensing deals, which were quite progressive for the time, increased his fame. He had an enormous impact on American culture, even working with Charlie Chaplin on "Modern Times" and screenwriting "Soup to Nuts," the first "Three Stooges" movie.

Part Leonardo da Vinci, William Hogarth (the 18th-century British artist who is considered to be the father of editorial cartoons), Thomas Edison, and Mel Brooks, Goldberg used draftsmanship and entrepreneurial skills to reach a wide audience. Over a prolific career of 72 years, he was financially rewarded generously for his artwork. As a syndicated comic strip artist, illustrator, author, screenwriter and Pulitzer Prize-winning political cartoonist, Goldberg is admired for pointing out "peculiar follies and hypocrisies of daily life from which spring the wonderful American standard of living."



Rube Goldberg's 'Concept Sketch of Boob McNutt' dates from the 1920s. It is an ink and pencil on paper. (Photo: Copyright © Rube Goldberg Inc. All Rights Reserved. RUBE GOLDBERG® is a registered trademark of Rube Goldberg Inc. All materials used with permission. www.rubegoldberg.com.)

He wrote: "My knowledge of science and mechanics is largely responsible for my progress as a cartoonist."

With Vaudevillian humor, a spirit of play and his background in engineering, Goldberg, who was called "the father of automation," commented on the country's fascination with technology and its effect on modern life.

In an email, Weintraub underscored that the chronologically organized exhibit presents "both the origins and development of Goldberg's timeless social satire and his often-overlooked contributions to the history of cartooning and of art."

"An equally important emphasis of the exhibition, however, is to showcase the formal invention of Goldberg's comic vision: the quality of his line, the tonal balance of his imagery, and the nuance of his composition," the curator wrote. Indeed, a drawing of a violinist that Goldberg completed when he was only 12 reveals his early skilled use of pen and ink.

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At the entrance of the show that fills the museum's fifth floor special exhibition galleries, a mechanical device of sequenced actions inspired by Goldberg's inventions engagingly brings out the inner child of any visitor. The exhibit also has a family-friendly interactive play area with materials and tables to do some tinkering. (Photo: Fred Adelson/For the Courier-Post)

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For proponents of STEAM (science, technology, engineering, art, and math) education, Goldberg singularly led the way long before it became a focus of

today's pedagogy. Conversely, anyone who may feel technology has gone a bit awry, Goldberg's machines demonstrate how something simple could become a ridiculously complicated series of activities.

Goldberg acknowledged that his inventions are “an illogical bunch of things which are put in a logical sequence.” Perhaps he is also telling us not to take ourselves too seriously. Using humor through his images and words, he is a groundbreaking personality who still remains quite inspirational.

Goldberg, the “improbable inventor,” was an excellent conceptualist but not a handyman. On “Person to Person,” a weekly television program, Edward R. Murrow interviewed an array of celebrities. In March 1959, he visited with the artist and his wife at their New York City home. In the broadcast, which is seen as a video clip in the exhibit, Mrs. Goldberg, who is sitting with her husband on the couch in their living room, matter-of-factly stated: “We’ve been married 42 years, Mr. Murrow; and he has never invented anything useful as yet like even fixing a bell or electric switch.”

Indeed, Jennifer George remembered an occasion when she and her grandfather tried to build one of his 1965 hobby kits, the automatic signaling device for shipwrecked sailors. She emphatically said: “it was a failed attempt.”



Rube Goldberg's 'I Never Thought of That (Portrait of Irma on Wedding Day),' is a 1916. ink on paper work with photograph. (Photo: Copyright © Rube Goldberg Inc. All Rights Reserved. RUBE GOLDBERG ® is a registered trademark of Rube Goldberg Inc. All materials used with permission. [www.rubegoldberg.com](http://www.rubegoldberg.com))

By the 1940s he began drawing editorial illustrations as newspaper cartoons started to decline in popularity. The artist admitted: “I could do two political cartoons a day, but an invention sometimes required a week.”

According to Jennifer George, the Goldberg family was harassed and received anti-Semitic threats during World War II. As his two sons went off to college, they legally changed their surname to George from “an obvious Jewish last name,” allowing them to develop independently of their father’s notoriety.

Many of his political subjects dealt with issues that are still pertinent. In fact, some of the images could easily run in today’s newspapers, like “Jews and Arabs” dating from September 1947. In this drawing created before the State of Israel was established, two figures follow separate but parallel roads to the horizon. An inscription at the top reads: “When will they find a meeting point?”

The following year, in 1948, Goldberg received the Pulitzer Prize for “Peace Today,” which shows a suburban house and its outdoor patio set atop a large atomic bomb that is teetering on the edge of a cliff.

One of the last images on display is “Future of Home Entertainment,” a futuristic cover design for “Forbes” magazine. Dating from March 15, 1967 just three years before the artist’s death, Goldberg depicts an affluent family in their living room. There is no communal interaction; everyone, including the pet kitten, is absorbed with his or her own device watching individual flat screen monitors. Interestingly, Josh Perelman mentioned that its original artwork only surfaced this past spring while the exhibition was on display in San Francisco, and it has now been generously loaned and subsequently added for the remainder of the show’s tour.



"The Art of Rube Goldberg" at the National Museum of American Jewish History, an affiliate of the Smithsonian Institution on Independence Mall in Philadelphia, looks at the significant career of Goldberg, who is largely associated with "ludicrously ridiculous 'inventions.'" 'Inventions (Bell-Buoy, Soup Spoon, Golf),' by Rube Goldberg was created circa 1938-1941. It is an ink and watercolor on paper work. (Photo: Copyright © Rube Goldberg Inc. All Rights Reserved. RUBE GOLDBERG ® is a registered trademark of Rube Goldberg Inc. All materials used with permission. <http://www.rubegoldberg.com>)

As both insider and outsider, Goldberg was an astute social observer of mainstream American culture. Some of his subjects and humor may seem a bit dated; yet his overarching message still continues to resonate. Given much of the irrational behavior in the country recently, it is fascinating to consider Goldberg prophetically wrote at the bottom of a roller coaster image titled "Amusement Park" in 1920: "You need a very stray pair of glasses to find any logic in real life."

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**If you go**

The Art of Rube Goldberg: Exhibition runs until Jan. 21 National Museum of American Jewish History, 101 S. Independence Mall East, Philadelphia. Visit [www.nmajh.org](http://www.nmajh.org) (<https://www.nmajh.org>) or (215) 923-3811

Hours: Tuesday to Friday: 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.; Saturday and Sunday: 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m.

NMAJH is closed Mondays, including most federal holidays, but open Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, Presidents' Day, Independence Day and Christmas Day.

Members: Free; adults, \$15; seniors (65 & up), \$13; youth ages 12-21 or with college ID, \$13; children, free; active military, free. (Visit website for discount information).

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'Wearable Inventions (Raising a Mustache),' date unknown, is an ink on paper work by Rube Goldberg. (Photo: Artwork Copyright © Rube Goldberg Inc. All Rights Reserved. RUBE GOLDBERG ® is a registered trademark of Rube Goldberg Inc. All materials used with permission. <http://www.rubegoldberg.com>)

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