

AUTOMATONS in History

People have been building automatons for a long, long time. One automaton from China is over 3000 years old!

Read the article, then discuss the questions at the end with your group.

Queen of Clean

In the 1200s, an inventor in ancient Turkey built a **hand-washing automaton**. It was a woman standing over a bowl of water. When you pulled a lever, the water would dump out, and the woman would refill the bowl. How did the water go away? This automaton used the same flush mechanism that we use in toilets today!



Photo by Grenavitar via Wikimedia (PDM 1.0)



Before There Was Disneyland . . .

Also in the 1200s, a French count created a very special garden for his castle. Not only did it have flowers and plants, it also had amazing automatons. Visitors could stroll around the garden and see **monkey marionettes**, **mechanical birds**, and a **self-playing organ**.

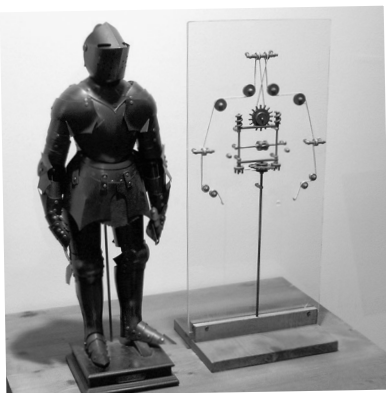


Photo by Erik Möller via Wikimedia (PD-self)

Move Over, Mona Lisa

In 1495, Leonardo da Vinci designed a **mechanical knight**. The suit of armor hid a system of gears and pulleys, so it looked like the knight could stand up, sit down, and move its head . . . all by itself!



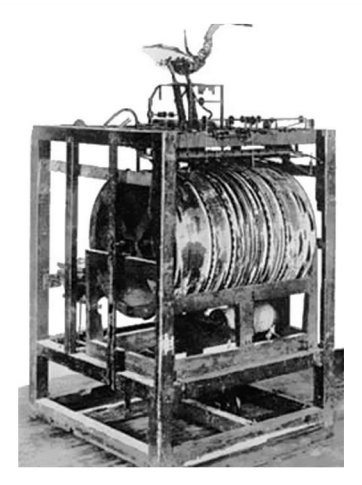


Photo by Deep silence via Wikimedia (PD-anon-70)

Plucky Duck

In 1739, a French engineer invented an automaton known as the "**Digesting Duck.**"

The duck seemed to eat pieces of grain . . . and then poop them out. (Ew.) As weird as it sounds, the duck was actually an impressive feat of engineering. It had over 400 moving parts in each wing!



Buyer Beware

In 1770, a chess-playing automaton called the **Mechanical Turk** became a hit in Europe. The automaton could beat almost everyone at chess — it even won against Benjamin Franklin once! However, people later learned that it was a hoax. The Mechanical Turk turned out not to be an automaton, but a machine with a human chess master hiding inside.

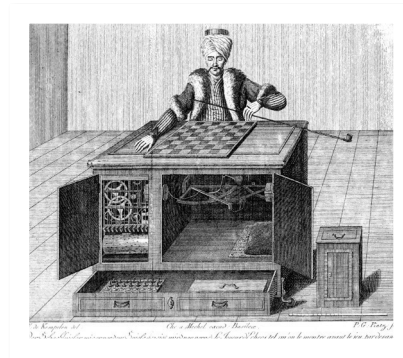


Photo by Schaeless via Wikimedia (PDM 1.0)



Photo by Jonathan Sauder (PD-NASA)

Modern Day

Even today, artists and inventors still work with automatons. At NASA, engineers are busy building **a wind-powered automaton to explore Venus.**

That's because the planet is so hot that electronics would melt almost instantly! By turning to automatons of the past, engineers can help solve today's problems.

Discussion Questions

1. What was your favorite automaton from the article, and why?
2. Why do you think people were so passionate about building automatons?
3. Why were automatons important in the past? Why are they important now?
4. How do these automatons compare to the one you're building?
5. If you could invent an automaton, what would it look like? What would it do?