



A collector's tale

Part 1: Inspiration and acquisition

by Michael Croft • Tucson, Arizona, USA • Photos by the author except where noted

In 1989, I was preparing for a trip to the UK. As I was surfing through some travel guides I came across a rather cryptic notation. In describing the various shops and attractions at Covent Garden in London, there was an almost throwaway line that simply said, "If you enjoy animated toys, be sure to plan to spend a delightful hour in the Cabaret Mechanical Theatre." While I understood the meaning of each of the words—cabaret, mechanical, and theater—I couldn't manage to make them work together. Quite frankly, I had no idea what to expect but I was intrigued, so I put it on the agenda.

At one corner of the lower arcade of Covent Garden was a fascinating establishment, a sort of cross between a shop, a showroom, and a penny arcade (**photo 1**). In front was a large window filled with small moving toys, several large coin-operated attractions, and a couple of truly



1. Cabaret Mechanical Theatre in Covent Garden, where it inspired thousands from 1984 to 2000. —Photo courtesy Cabaret Mechanical Theatre

wondrous large moving displays. Inside a rather dark and cave-like atmosphere was a small shop (**photo 2**) that gave entrance to a room packed with animated figures inside glass boxes, some coin-operated, some not (**photo 3**). This was Cabaret Mechanical

Theatre (CMT) and the wonderful world of automata. I had never experienced anything remotely like it, either before or since. Sadly, CMT is no longer there.

After my first introduction to CMT, my interest in automata didn't really revive until about

10 years later. I was teaching three-dimensional design and was looking for something to really "hook" my students, who diligently pursued the projects I assigned but did so with a fairly detached attitude. I hit upon the notion of introducing the concept