

Rube Goldberg drew on human complexities too

By Jordana Landres, qboro contributor | Posted: Wednesday, November 27, 2019 10:30 am

When a man is so influential his name becomes a new dictionary entry to describe the deeper meaning behind his creations, that's pretty much the definition of high impact. Merriam-Webster defines "Rube Goldberg" as an adjective meaning "accomplishing by complex means what seemingly could be done simply."

He officially became a reference noun in 1928.

Inventor, engineer, vaudeville comedian, illustrator and Pulitzer Prize-winning political cartoonist and satirist Goldberg himself referred to his fantastical invention drawings as a "symbol of man's capacity for exerting maximum effort to achieve minimal results."

"The Art of Rube Goldberg" at the Queens Museum is the first comprehensive retrospective of his work since 1970, and pulls together close to 100 never-exhibited pieces. His brilliant invention cartoons depicting machines that require exhaustive multiple steps and processes to complete basic tasks are a beloved part of New York and American culture — but the exhibit highlights much of Goldberg's other work that won him praise in his time.

"It's especially fitting for the Queens Museum to present the art of Rube Goldberg," says Sally Tallant, the institution's executive director. "Rube Goldberg's generation saw an unprecedented and rapid explosion of new technology, and he was his moment's best satirist. It's productive for us to think about our time in relation to that one moment, and bring Goldberg's humor and humanity to the table while doing so. Playfulness and humor have always been an important element of visitors' experience at the Museum."

One of Goldberg's oldest extant drawings is "The Old Violinist," which he drew in 1895 at age 11 and, shocking no one, reveals profound early talent, capturing the warmth of the subject in a palpable way.

A compelling central focal point of the exhibit is an interactive multimedia machine combining solid objects along with video screens to pay whimsical tribute to Goldberg's invention drawings.

Goldberg's sharp eye and ear for daily language and human interactions gave creative rise to the comic strip "Foolish Questions," which premiered in the New York Evening Mail Oct. 23, 1908, featuring sarcastic and wildly imaginative answers to unnecessary questions. Spanning subject matter from tennis to shaving to a guy pretending to be headed on a long voyage to avoid having to buy a present for his girlfriend, "Foolish Questions" deftly captured the endearingly grouchy interactions between people, making the deeper point



that, like poorly designed machines, superfluous communication is a clunky contraption in and of itself, a form of interpersonal social inefficiency.

The strip was so popular readers wrote letters to the paper suggesting their questions. A compilation book of “Foolish Questions” was published in 1909.

“Mike and Ike-They Look Alike,” “Phony Bolognias” and an original concept drawing of Goldberg’s character “Boob McNutt” were all drawn in the 1910s and 1920s.

The charm and the power of Goldberg’s writing, set against the backdrop of life-altering historical events like World War I, the Great Depression and Prohibition, invaluabley capsulized a real-time reaction, allowing a window into a perspective that further undergirds his multigenerational appeal as he captured the day-to-day of modern life and the language of the time.

After Prohibition was repealed in 1933, one of Goldberg’s cartoons for the Saturday Evening Mail on ink and paper reveals an amusing series of regular people reveling in alcohol’s renewed legality and mass availability. Notably and sarcastically, a little schoolgirl asks her teacher for money to buy beer.

Exposing and skewering human foibles and idiosyncrasies, yet also doing so with deep affection, “The Art of Rube Goldberg” is an experience to be savored.

‘The Art of Rube Goldberg’

When: Through Feb. 9, 2020

Where: Queens Museum, Flushing Meadows Corona Park

**Entry: \$8 suggested; \$4 seniors; free students, kids. (718) 592-9700,
queensmuseum.org**