

# Bonhams

AUCTIONEERS SINCE 1793

## Rowland Emmet's Masterpiece

A Quiet Afternoon in the Cloud Cuckoo Valley

New Bond Street, London | 3 September 2019 at 1pm

## Frederick Rowland Emmet OBE (British, B. 1906 – D. 1990)

Born in 1906 in London, England, son of a businessman and amateur inventor, and the grandson of Queen Victoria's engraver, Emmet unsurprisingly studied art and started employment in the commercial art field. Seeing a friend paid handsomely by *Punch Magazine* for what he thought was a poorly drawn cartoon, he submitted his own, quickly becoming one of the most popular cartoonists at *Punch*, and eventually becoming Cartoon Editor.

Many of Emmet's cartoons featured outlandish trains and railway scenes of strange bumbling trains with excessively tall chimneys and silly names. These did not go unnoticed and in 1950 the organisers of the 1951 Festival of Britain approached him to see if he might create a real-life version of his cartoon *Far Twittering and Oyster Perch Railway*' (later renamed *The Far Tottering and Oyster Creek Railway*). As such it became one of the main attractions at the Festival, carrying over 2 million people around the Festival park and made his reputation as a maker of mechanical 'Things'. This led to numerous commissions by commercial organisations and local authorities, and the ensuing years saw Emmet creating many other machines and artworks that have continued to fascinate onlookers for decades.

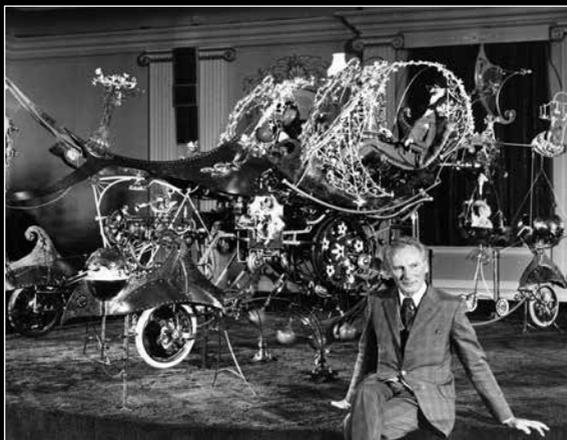
His larger works, such as Emmetland, went on extended tours, ending up in prestigious venues such as the Smithsonian Institution in Washington. The Ontario Science Centre in Toronto has a

collection of about ten Emmet creations and every December displays the restored working pieces, usually under the title *'Dream Machines'*. The Mid-America Science Museum has had four of his inventions on permanent display for most of the museum's existence.

However, his most recognisable pieces (in many people's eyes) are the crazy inventions or 'thingamabobs' of 'Caractacus Potts' (played by Dick Van Dyke) in the 1968 all-time classic movie *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*.

Originally commissioned as a landmark clock, *A Quiet Afternoon In The Cloud Cuckoo Valley* was destined to adorn a new shopping area in Basildon, England. But by the time the artwork was completed in 1984, those plans had changed. It was bought instead by the present owner and was not exhibited until 1992 – in Spitalfields Market, London. When it's time at Spitalfields came to an end, *Cloud Cuckoo Valley* was again put into what was thought to be safe storage...but in 1999 it was stolen by some enterprising thieves from a warehouse in Hertfordshire. It was sold by the thieves to a scrap metal dealer who became suspicious and alerted the Police, and it was thankfully recovered.

*'A Quiet Afternoon in the Cloud Cuckoo Valley'* is a perfect example of Emmet's whimsical imagination and is in his own words "the best and biggest of all his mechanical things".



Rowland Emmet, with his 'Vintage Car of the Future'

## Rowland Emmett's Masterpiece: A Quiet Afternoon in the Cloud Cuckoo Valley

Built in 1984, this is the last and largest of this celebrated artist's output and encapsulates many of the themes that appeared in his work over the decades. Through his whimsical imagination Emmett has created this extraordinary machine that wholeheartedly reflects these talents combined with a very British sense of humour. It depicts the tale of a pleasure trip on the *Far Tottering and Oyster Creek Railway* that tells a single story.

The fully restored and working kinetic sculpture is in fact made up of eight larger-than life automata which complete the canvas of *A Quiet Afternoon on the Cloud Cuckoo Valley*.

The centre of the creation features a train called *Wild Goose*, driven by an ingenious driver who toasts tea-cakes on the fire-box as the train trundles along a raised railway line. At *Cow Parsely Meadow* a farmer plays his harp soothingly to his herd of cows, who nod their heads in appreciation. There is a large water wheel that turns timelessly at *Far Tottering*, its brass cups beaten and misshapen from years of use. In a secluded dell at *Wisteria Halt*, there is a beautiful flowering tree on top of which sits a clock – originally intended as the focal point of the whole piece. At *Shrimphaven Sands*, a fisherman can be seen out at sea, hauling in a net in which, rather surprisingly, he appears to have caught a mermaid. As *Wild Goose* continues its journey past *Twittering Woods*, an ornithologist is seen cycling along

with his camera – he is disguised as a tree and has done such a good job at hiding from his quarry that a bird has chosen to make its nest in his bicycle lamp. On the beach at *Oyster Creek*, a bathing hut is occupied by an elderly gentleman dressed in full length Victorian swimwear, who dives dramatically into the water from time to time. Finally, for those passengers on *Wild Goose* whose wishes and dreams are not yet met, there is a wishing well, complete with a typically Emmett-esque leaking bucket!

The machine would operate with the timing that Emmett intended and therefore strikes at the quarter hour and bursts into life for a few minutes each time.

### Dimensions of the largest part, the locomotive:

8.3m long x 1.2m wide x 5m high

### Exhibitions include:

- Spitalfields Market, London, 1992
- Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, May 2014  
The first Rowland Emmett exhibition of its kind.
- 'The Mechanical Things', Birmingham Science Museum, December 2016 to March 2017 – which featured Cloud Cuckoo Valley as its centrepiece.
- Chelsea Flower Show, London, 2017 -  
Birmingham City Council won both a Gold and Platinum Medal for the display at the flower show.
- 'The Marvellous Mechanical Museum', Compton Verney, Warwickshire, June-September 2018.

**Estimate: Refer to department**



‘It is cartooning, it’s only cartooning’  
These are just extensions of the

– Rowland



tooning in three dimensions.  
the sort of drawings I like to do ’

and Emmett





‘If you can make people laugh,  
then that's something isn't it ’

– Rowland Emmett





**PREVIEW**

12 August - 3 September  
Monday to Friday - 9am to 4.30pm

**Rowland Emett's Masterpiece:  
A Quiet Afternoon in the Cloud  
Cuckoo Valley**

New Bond Street, London  
3 September 2019 at 1pm

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For further information, dimensions of each part of the sculpture, additional images, condition and technical reports please contact the department

All photography by James Bastable.co.uk  
and CloudCuckoo Valley.com

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