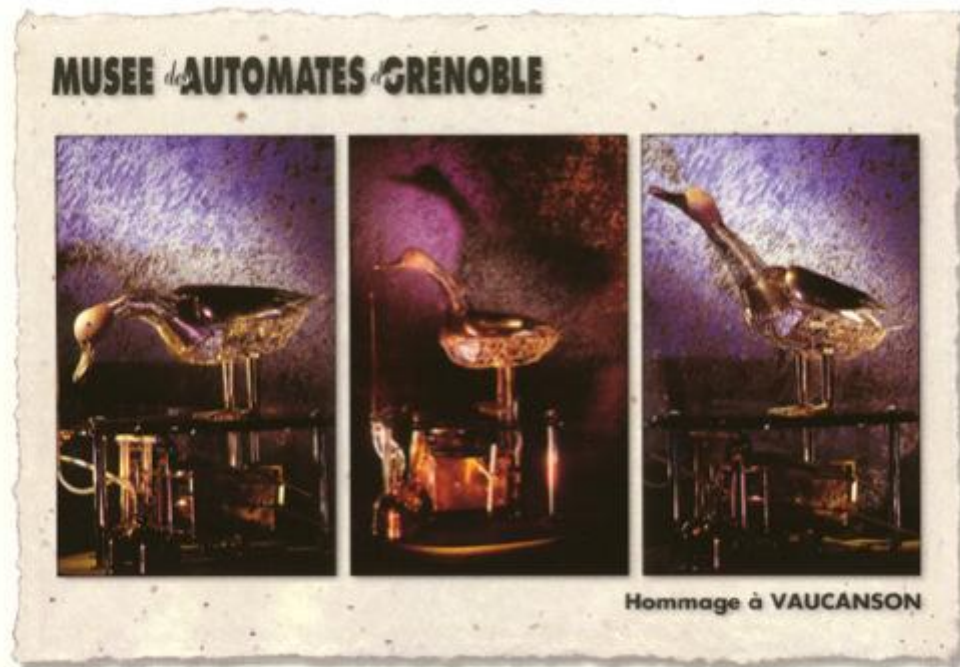


## The Duck Automata of Vaucanson



One of the most famous automata builders of the 18th century was Jacques de Vaucanson about whom Voltaire said, "A rival to Prometheus, [Vaucanson] seemed to steal the heavenly fires in his search to give life." Although he built a large number of automatons his most famous was the duck automata (pictured above). The automata could flap its wings, and even eat grain. A replica of the duck has been created at a Museum in Grenoble, France. The following is an excerpt from Wikipedia on the cultural impact of the Duck automata.

The Digesting Duck of France was unveiled by its creator, Jacques de Vaucanson, as the first automaton able to metabolise food and digest it, expelling waste just as a mortal duck, in the spring of 1739. During The Enlightenment, a time of mechanisation of labour, the idea that human beings could be replaced by these enigmatic, never-tiring aberrations of nature created a cultural revolution. These mechanisations of eighteenth-century France probably inspired the illustrious duck of the master toy-

maker, Jacques de Vaucanson, which won the heart and admiration of the whole of Europe.

Vaucanson's Digesting Duck followed the principles of Descartes's mechanistic universe, and bolstered the Enlightenment-era belief that animals were just meat machines, but automatons nonetheless. The ability to create life no longer was the domain of God and of living organisms, but was now captive in the hands of man's genius. These ideas terrified and excited many people, but were one of the major ideological changes from a natural to a mechanistic world view.

Vaucanson quickly capitalised on the commercial success of his first android, modelled after a recent sculpture by Antoine Coysevox then in the gardens of the Palais des Tuileries, with the launch of a shepherd who played the tabor and pipe. The most acclaimed member of Vaucanson's trinity of entertaining equipment, however, was the notorious eating, digesting, and defecating duck. Whereas the rustic flutist inhaled, exhaled, and dexterously moved his fingers over a musical instrument, this barnyard variant of Phil's and Hero's bejewelled birds eagerly swallowed kernels of grain to excrete them in the metamorphosed shape of pellets. Unfortunately, this amazing transformation proved fraudulent. The delicate droppings were not the natural result of simulated peristalsis, but of a secondary device triggering the sphincter where a masticated plop lay hidden.

Source: <http://davinciautomata.wordpress.com/2007/06/12/the-duck-automata-of-vaucanson/>