

Rube Goldberg / Background Information



Rube Goldberg was a Pulitzer price winning inventor, cartoonist, sculptor, and writer. He was born Reuben Lucius Goldberg in 1883 in San Francisco. His father insisted he attend college to become an engineer. After graduating from University of California Berkeley, Rube went to work as an engineer with the city of San Francisco Water and Sewer Department.

He enjoyed drawing, and after six months on the job informed his father that he had to work as an artist. He soon got a job as an office boy in the sports department of a San Francisco newspaper. He kept submitting drawings and cartoons to his editor until he was published. His success was immediate; he moved from San Francisco to New York, drawing cartoons for the Evening Mail. A founding member of the National Cartoonist Society, Rube was an acclaimed national figure as well as an oft-quoted radio and TV personality during his 60 year career.

Via his “inventions,” Rube Goldberg discovered difficult ways to achieve easy results. His cartoons, he stated, were symbols of man’s capacity for exerting maximum effort to accomplish minimal results. Rube believed that there were two ways to do things: the simple way and the hard way, and that a surprisingly large number of people preferred doing things the hard way.

Rube Goldberg’s work endures because he gave priority to simple human needs and treasured basic human values. He could be skeptical about technology, which helps explain why his mechanical inventions were often primitive and full of human, plant, and animal parts. While most machines work to make difficult tasks simple, Rube’s inventions made simple tasks amazingly complex. Dozens of arms, gears, wheels, handles, cups, and rods were put in motion by balls, canary cages, pails, boots, bathtubs, paddles, and live animals for simple tasks like squeezing an orange or closing a window in case it should start to rain before one gets home.

Rube’s drawings depict absurdly-connected machines functioning in highly complex and roundabout ways to produce a simple end result; for this Rube Goldberg has become associated with any convoluted system used to achieve a basic task.

His inventions are a unique commentary on life’s complexities, providing a humorous diversion into the absurd that lampoons the wonders of technology.

Some past “Rube Goldberg” challenges used in engineering education classes across the U.S. have been: 1991 Toast a Slice of Bread, 1992 Unlock a Combination Padlock, 1993 Screw a Light Bulb into a Socket, 1994 Make a Cup of Coffee, 1995 Turn on a Radio, 1996 Put Coins in a Bank, 1997 Insert and then Play a CD Disk, 1998 To Shut Off an Alarm Clock, 1999 To Set a Golf Tee and Tee Up a Golf Ball, 2000 To Fill and Seal a Time Capsule with 20th Century Inventions, 2001 To Select, Clean and Peel an Apple, 2002 To Select, Raise and Wave a National Flag, 2003 To Select, Crush and Recycle an Empty Soft Drink Can.