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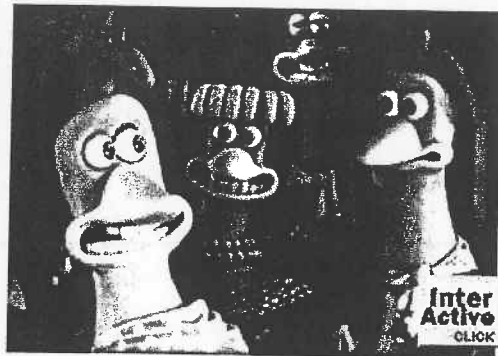
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# Feature Comforts



## A History of Clay Animation: Part 1

Rocky, left, is an American rooster hiding out in a British hen house in *Chicken Run*. Ginger, in the green hat, thinks he can help all the fowls flee the farm. For more on clay animation – from Gumby to Rudolph to the PJs – click on the photo. (Dreamworks)

By *Mark Bloch*  
abcNEWS.com

July 10 — Nick Park and Peter Lord's latest creation is like a goose that laid a golden egg. Except the goose is actually a hen and it's made of clay. Well, the egg is clay. But it's becoming clear: These feats of clay are worth millions.

*Chicken Run* has become the first feature-length work of clay animation to fill movie theaters, grossing \$17.5 million its first weekend and over \$45 million in the two weeks since. That's a lot of Play-doh.

But the success begs the questions: Why hasn't clay animation been tried more often? And why did two previous attempts at full-length clay features stall at the box office?

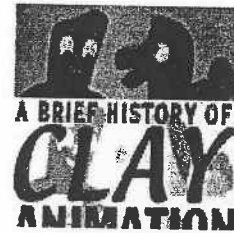
### THE SCULPTOR'S NIGHTMARE

Vortiginous Aberrations of a Modern Age  
LENGTH: 90 FEET. FROM: 19 CENTURY PRA PRAU.



It's a feature-length work of animation. The first of its kind, and the first of its kind to be shown in the United States. The film is a masterpiece of clay animation, and it's a must-see for anyone who loves the art form. It's a story of a sculptor who is haunted by his own creations, and it's a story that is both terrifying and beautiful. The film is a testament to the power of clay animation, and it's a work of art that will be remembered for generations to come.

For one thing, clay does not fit the model of the Hollywood dream factory. In "traditional" animation, like *Aladdin* or *Bugs Bunny* cartoons, the images are painted on clear celluloid sheets, known as "cel" animation, one frame at a time. This type of animation can be broken down infinitely into tiny



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molded into armatures with latex coverings.

The earliest surviving use of the technique is *The Sculptor's Nightmare*, a spoof on the 1908 presidential election. In the final reel of the film, a slab of clay on a pedestal comes to life, metamorphosing into a bust of Teddy Roosevelt. Mack Sennet and D.W. Griffith, two important pioneers of early cinema, appear in the live-action portion of the film.

In 1917, the first female animator of any kind, New York's Helena Smith Dayton, used real doll clothes and human hair to add realism to her clay depictions of fairy tales and classic literature, including *Romeo and Juliet*.

### The B-Movie Guru

Jump forward a few decades to find another special-effects master interested in fairy tales. Ray Harryhausen made clay dinosaurs as a kid, then got his first job as a model animator on George Pal's *Puppetoons*.

Later, assisting Willis O'Brien (the genius who in 1933 turned an 18-inch-tall cat fur-covered model into *King Kong*), Harryhausen worked on *Mighty Joe Young* in 1949.

In films like 1958's *The Seventh Voyage of Sinbad* and 1963's *Jason and the Argonauts* (which includes the famous animated skeleton sequence that took 4 1/2 months to create), Harryhausen perfected his craft. In 1992, he received a special Oscar for inspiring an entire generation of animators and special-effects artists.

Harryhausen's first employer, the Hungarian Pal, created the *Puppetoon* series for Paramount. "The NAACP thought they were racist," says Frierson, "and they are. He mistakenly thought he was doing folk tales."

Pal used 100 carved wooden replacement heads to animate the characters. So not only did racial tension ensue, but also a controversy over just what is clay animation: If the heads are carved wood, is it still clay animation?

### He's Green, He's Gumby

Meanwhile, with movies being replaced by television throughout the 1950s, Warner Bros. cut back on its cel cartoon output by a third, stopping completely by 1969. A less sophisticated made-for-TV style, by Hanna-Barbera, had taken over. The time was right for

clay's first superstar: Gumby.

"The whole motivation for making Gumby was to give children something of real value," says the green guy's creator, Art Clokey. "Gumby was expressing my love for children by telling stories from the heart."

NBC gave Clokey a contract to produce a series from 1956-1963. Gumby and his orange horse Pokey became icons.

Not many people realize that Clokey was also the creator of another curious series of that era: the moralistic *Davey and Goliath*. "The Lutherans saw Gumby on WPIX in New York and called me," Clokey says. "It was shown more than Gumby, actually. The church gave the films to the stations for free. It was an act of service to society."

### Gumby's Long Shadow

Clokey, now 76 years old, is still zealously engaged in clay animation. Gumby has his own personality cult and was immortalized in an Eddie Murphy skit on *Saturday Night Live*. *Davey and Goliath* references



When *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer* debuted in early December 1964, few could have predicted that the show would still be broadcast at holiday time three decades later. (rankinbass.com)

and several other holiday classics. Premiering on NBC in December 1964, the *Rudolph* special promoted the appliances of sponsor General Electric with a soundtrack LP featuring narrator Burl Ives. *Rudolph* and *Frosty* were big hits with kids, and the Rankin and Bass specials remain holiday perennials.

have recently popped up everywhere from *The Simpsons* and *Mad TV* to the work of Todd Haines, director of the glam rock choral *The Velvet Goldmine*. (Haines also made the now-banned *Karen Carpenter Story*, a very dark comedy told with hand-held Barbie dolls.)

Finally, the prolific team of Arthur Rankin Jr. and Jules Bass produced *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer*, *Frosty the Snow Man*

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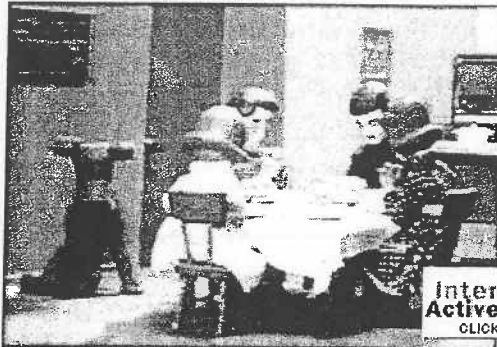
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## Clay Has Its Day



### A History of Clay Animation: Part 2

The family that clays together, prays together. Art Clokey, creator of *Gumby*, also made *Davey and Goliath* for the Lutheran Church. Click the photo for more on clay animation, from its start to its current incarnation in *Chicken Run*. (Art Clokey)

By Mark Bloch

abc NEWS.com

July 13 — When experimental filmmaking “busted out” in the 1960s and early ’70s, clay animation was not immune to the change. But with the changes came questions about just what constitutes “clay” animation.

In 1971, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences widened its “Best Short Subject” category from “Cartoon” to “Animated Film,” and that cleared the big clay road.

Three years later, filmmaker Will Vinton, influenced by the flowing clay forms of the Spanish architect Gaudi, won that Oscar, in collaboration with his friend Bob Gardiner, for *Closed Mondays*.

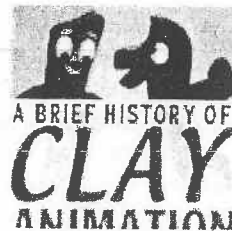
And the plot was certainly not the usual kiddie fare. “It was the story of a wino wandering into an art museum,” says Vinton.

A lot of other animators were taking their cue from cel animation, which used the film frame like a theatrical stage. But filmmaking was evolving, and Vinton decided to take advantage of those changes in *Closed*



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*Mondays*. “Cuts, extreme close-ups, dramatic camera angles hadn’t been made use of in animation.” He figured it was time.

Vinton soon completed the world’s first feature-length clay animation, *The Adventures of Mark Twain*. He calls the 72-minute film “the zenith of pure clay animation: 100 percent clay. We were purists in

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One of Nick Park's earlier films, besides the popular *Wallace and Gromit* series, was *Creature Comforts* which also won an Oscar for Aardman. Its characters were later used to sell candy in England. (Aardman)

those days.”

But while clay had begun to distinguish itself as more than an expensive cousin of cel animation, Vinton recalls that *Mark Twain* “never found its audience.”

### So Much Larger Than Life

While Vinton remains proud of such high-brow fare, his production company is best known for the *California Raisins* commercial, which featured dried fruit grooving to the beat of “I Heard It Through the Grapevine.”

“I knew it would be a great ad campaign, a fun idea, but I had no idea it’d be a *phenomena*,” says Vinton. “I still get introduced as the Raisin King.”

Recent decades have produced an innovative proliferation of pure clay in the service of cutting-edge TV programs as well as commercials and music videos. Frank Zappa’s 1979 *Baby Snakes* capitalized on clay’s inherent characteristics, such as sagging and stretching, which other animators find troubling.

In 1968, Joan Gratz began painting with clay and used her innovative technique in a 1990 United Airlines commercial. In 1992, she won an Oscar for her seven-minute short *Mona Lisa Descending a Staircase*.

Clay had some memorable moments in the ’80s. Vinton Studios won an Emmy in 1987 for clay portraits of stars Cybill Shepherd and Bruce Willis on the hit series *Moonlighting*. *Pee-wee’s Playhouse* commissioned Aardman to create the late 1980s *Penny Cartoon* series, then animator David Daniels in 1987 for a pair of short using his “strata” technique.

Daniels is also known for his 1987 video *Big Time*

