

## So Boring It Must Be True: Faux History and the Generation of Wonder at the Museum of Jurassic Technology

Among the natural wonders exhibited by the Museum of Jurassic Technology, perhaps none is more wondrous than the *Deprong Mori*, or “Piercing Devil.” As the exhibition script explains, this unusual bat boasts a remarkable ability unique in the animal kingdom—it can fly through walls. Like other flying mice, the *Deprong Mori* uses echolocation to get around; unlike other bats, it emits X-ray pulses instead of ultrasonic pulses. Fleshy leaf-like adaptations on the side of its nose focus the animal’s energy to briefly carve out spaces in solid objects, allowing the creature passage through matter as dense as wood.

As the museum makes clear, until relatively recently only folktales told in rural jungle villages of northern South America hinted at *Deprong Mori*’s existence. Scientists could find no direct evidence of the ghostly animal. Its singular ability rendered nets and traps useless. In 1952 bat researcher Donald Griffith came across anthropologist Bernard Maston’s 1872 recounting of the villagers’ stories, and began to search in earnest. Griffith and his team spent painstaking months attempting to capture a specimen. They eventually devised an ingenious star-shaped trap consisting of five panels of solid lead, each measuring twenty feet tall, two hundred feet long, and eight inches thick. Its echolocative abilities finally stymied, an unfortunate *Deprong Mori* embedded itself in one of the lead walls. Science had finally unveiled the mysteries of the “Piercing Devil.”

Unfortunately the Museum of Jurassic Technology does not display an actual *Deprong Mori*. It does, however, make the creature’s story engaging and intelligible by augmenting the tale of the search, the science of echolocation, and analysis of Griffith’s capture techniques with original illustrations and scale models designed to engross even the most science-averse individual.

About two-thirds through the exhibit the avid reader might think, “Hold on . . . enormous walls of solid lead hauled into a South American jungle? A bat that emits X-ray pulses? Really? Wait a second! That’s impossible.”

The avid reader would be right. There is no X-ray bat. No enormous lead walls. No savage natives and their promising stories. For that matter, neither a Maston nor a Griffith.

But it all seems real enough. The exhibit certainly exists. There, in a glass case illuminated by tiny spotlights, sit the well-crafted models, appropriately precise drawings, and well-tuned

scieny explanations. The presentation renders the language convincing beyond its content; affixed seamlessly to the wall as museum text is wont to be, the words become especially winning when spoken by a pleasant, authoritatively bland voice issuing from telephone handsets accompanying the case. Detail upon detail bolsters the narrative’s persuasiveness. The text calmly hails the viewer: You know, you should consider a man named Maston: hear tell of a man named Griffith: pay heed to their trudging exploits: they did things: they did them in specific years; in specific places; with specific things measured in specific lengths and widths. Each detail seems so plausible, each so believable—until one hits the point where the whole becomes less than the sum of its parts.

Then for some of us, the moment turns upside-down. The whole—the exhibit, the text, the voice, the drawings, the glass, the unnoticed reception of new knowledge and the stunning realization of hoaxed disbelief—transmutes into something much greater than just its elements pieced together.

That “Wait a second . . .” moment provides one of the Museum of Jurassic Technology’s central pleasures—or one of its grand frustrations. It challenges the visitor to be simultaneously amazed by and wary of its astonishing contents. It perplexes at the very moment it informs. One can never be certain that the stories match the objects, or that either story or object cleaves in any firm way to that which we normally call reality. For its fans, one of the museum’s prime attractions is the disconnection between a place that looks and feels like a standard museum, yet contains decidedly non-standard artifacts and notions. As Marcia Tucker, Director of New York’s New Museum put it, “Everything initially just seems self-evidently what it is. There’s this fine line, though, between knowing you’re experiencing something and sensing that something is wrong. There’s this slight slippage, which is the very essence of the place” (qtd in Weschler 39). For them, the discrepancy between the expected and the actual generates a phenomenon jaded moderns and incredulous postmoderns seldom experience—a sense of wonder. As John McMurtrie reported on *Salon.com*, “The beauty of it all was that it seemed as if everything I came across could be real. More importantly, I felt, was whether or not I had the capacity to drop my defenses, to simply be free to wonder.” Historian Susan A. Crane goes so far as to argue that it is not a museum at all, or even a piece of performance art, but in fact constitutes a contemporary Cabinet of Curiosities, standing in direct line with early modern European *Wunderkammern*.<sup>1</sup> It functions not so much to order knowledge as to stimulate awe by awakening conjecture, prompting astonishment, and confounding the intellect (Crane 8). Journalist Lawrence Weschler titled his book about the place simply *Mr. Wilson’s Cabinet of Wonder*.

The Museum of Jurassic Technology is a very real place that showcases some not very real things—although neither the artifacts nor the scripts indicate otherwise. (The curious can find most of the museum’s text on its website, [www.mjt.org](http://www.mjt.org).) Yet, it is not an assemblage of the merely absurd and the fantastic. Indeed, a good portion of its collection is undoubtedly authentic. Palpably real objects, such as intricate sculptures each nestled comfortably inside the eye of a needle or a set of oil paintings depicting the Soviets’ canine cosmonauts, mix promiscuously with the likes of the *Deprong Mori* in a setting that speaks nothing more clearly than, “This is a museum. You should be paying attention.” It calmly delivers dubious knowledge with the somber gravitas expected of the better cultural institutions in those days before curators made sacrifices to the God of Fun.

Lifework of MacArthur-certified genius David Hildebrand Wilson, the Museum of Jurassic Technology presents itself as “an educational institution dedicated to the advancement of knowledge and the public appreciation of the Lower Jurassic” ([www.mjt.org/intro/main2.html](http://www.mjt.org/intro/main2.html)). A moment’s reflection on the works of Michael Crichton reveals the contradictions implicit to “Jurassic” and “Technology.” That cognitive gap opens wide chasms of possibility. If one can bridge the cognitive gap presented by such anachronistic terms living harmoniously in a single title, one may easily accept that the museum contains a variety of cases tangibly illustrating age-old beliefs regarding the curative powers of mouse sandwiches, duck’s breath, and urine found down the hall from an exhibit of letters written to Los Angeles’s Wilson Observatory by otherwise unheralded visionaries (aka crackpots). Nor will the visitor be surprised to encounter exhibits on the phenomenon of the Southern California trailer park, examples from magician/actor Ricky Jay’s collection of crumbling Cellulose Nitrate dice, or elaborate recreations of the notions and machinations envisioned by seventeenth-century polymath Athanasius Kircher. When asked directly what the museum *is*, Wilson responded enigmatically, “We’re a small natural history museum with an emphasis on curiosities and technological innovation” (Weschler 27).

For almost twenty years the Museum of Jurassic Technology has quietly presented its singular mélange of esoteric information, explicitly inviting the visitor to experience “life in the Jurassic” while surreptitiously coaxing a reconsideration of how we manufacture knowledge ([www.mjt.org/intro/main2.html](http://www.mjt.org/intro/main2.html)). It couches its idiosyncratic version of the world in universalizing terms, banking on visitors holding an implicit assumption that in a museum one looks at artifacts and reads information because one *should* look at and read about them. This, arguably, mirrors the function of all museums. In the past, the wealthy and scholarly hoarded remarkable objects in

*Wunderkammern* (literally “wonder cabinets”) for private contemplation. The Enlightenment-era transition from *Wunderkammer* to museum contained an implicit pedagogy. In the proper museum one does not look at items merely because they provoke wonder. Instead, objects hold the power to edify and uplift. Lest the viewer miss the effects of that power, explanatory scripts direct the viewer’s attention to the pertinent facts. Through the data those scripts contain, the visitor comes to understand the importance of those objects. Presumably, guided exposure to illustrative specimens reveals deeper principles, and thus improves a visiting public. Thus, the museum serves as an arbiter of knowledge, conferring an aura of potency and significance to both object and explanation.

More recently, it seems that mere cultural power is not enough. Increasingly visitors, scholarly and lay alike, have interrogated the power behind museum displays. As Stephen J. Greenblatt points out, exhibits often provoke as many questions as they answer:

How have the objects come to be displayed? What is at stake in categorizing them as of “museum-quality”? How were they originally used? What cultural and material conditions made possible their production? What were the feelings of those who originally held these objects, cherished them, collected them, possessed them? What is the meaning of my relationship to these same objects now that they are displayed here, in this museum, on this day? (173)

Such questions strike at the roots of the museum’s implicit power, potentially undermining the institution’s claims to both legitimacy and the viewer’s attention. Indeed, it seems as if some curators have felt something of a crisis of confidence, and have sought to rekindle a sense of wonder. Greenblatt notes that the very strategies of museum displays cultivate the visitor’s awe even as it reinforces the institution’s position as knowledge-broker:

The so-called boutique-lighting that has become popular in recent years—a pool of light that has the surreal effect of seeming to emerge from within the object rather than to focus upon it from without—is an attempt to provoke or to heighten the experience of wonder, as if modern museum designers feared that wonder was increasingly difficult to arouse. (176)

The Museum of Jurassic Technology generates wonder in its own idiosyncratic manner. Using forms and strategies employed by other museums, it plays on generic expectations by presenting unusual, fantastic, even untenable facts in a medium that undercuts their sensationalism. It positions objects in the style Greenblatt describes, yet the very material subverts the questions he claims museums provoke. In the Museum of Jurassic Technology, inquiries about the relationship between knowledge, objects, and curatorial power become increasingly slippery. Arcane without being titillating, informative without being truthful, the museum prompts a deeper epistemological conundrum: “How do we know what we know?” and its companion riddle, “So what? What kind of knowledge actually matters?”

Enter history.

The Museum of Jurassic Technology positions itself as a kind of natural history museum—a collection of artifacts that explain the world as it is, has been, and, barring human malfeasance, always shall be. In practice, however, the museum anchors itself in the trappings of history rather than science. Arguably, the museum’s genius rests on its histories, especially the histories it creates. By creating plausibly lackluster histories for improbable—even impossible—facts, the museum trades on the visitor’s rarely-examined notion that history breeds legitimacy.

Almost all the museum’s exhibits open with historical narratives. They are accounts of discovery, creation, origin or, most disconcerting to the unwarily casual, simply stories. The stories guide the visitor’s vision and validate particular interpretations, fostering credibility that enables a cognitive legerdemain. They envelop artifacts and objects both curious and absurd in trappings of authority and authenticity. The sheer volume of names, dates, measurements, references, and other such formal detritus of the verifiable builds a foundation for confidence. After all, as some Latter-Day Saints defending Joseph Smith’s golden tablets might put it: It must be true; no one could make it all up ([www.josephsmith.com](http://www.josephsmith.com)). When there is so much stuff there to ingest and ruminate, then there surely must be something nutritious at its core. As a corollary, if it is so boring, it must be true.

Nothing illustrates the museum’s exploitation of history as a strategy more than the Delani/Sonnabend Halls. The museum devotes these areas to the interlocking stories of singer Madelena Delani and neurophysiologist and memory researcher Geoffrey Sonnabend. The visitor first learns about Sonnabend through the story of his father, who had been contracted to build a bridge across Iguacu Falls. A vitrine containing an elaborate model of the falls, complete with running water, provides the room’s focal point accented by sepia-toned photographs of various bridge projects, portraits of the elder Sonnabend’s benefactors, and other individuals key to the story.

An adjacent room focuses on Madame Delani's career as a successful singer of light-classical tunes in the 1920s. Here, the narrator from the *Deprong Mori* exhibit relates the incidents in her life against an aural backdrop of a woman singing. A trail of photographs arrayed along the walls illuminates and darkens in synchronization with the story. In the room's center, a glass-covered table displays gloves, pins, sheet music, and other of the singer's possessions. As the museum tells it, Delani possessed two remarkable qualities—a beautiful voice and a deficiency of short-term memory. The exhibit focuses almost solely on the career she built on the former and gives little more than a cursory mention of her memory troubles, although they provide the only clear reason for her inclusion in the exhibit ([www.mjt.org/exhibits/delson/delani.html](http://www.mjt.org/exhibits/delson/delani.html)).

Further along, the visitor learns that Geoffrey Sonnabend attended Delani's final performance, which took place at Iguassu [*sic*]. She died the next day in a freak car accident; coincidentally, perhaps, Sonnabend that same day began forming a revolutionary theory about the nature of forgetting. Visitors may watch a continuously-looped film while listening to an explanatory narrative through a telephone receiver to better understand that theory, the concept of “obliscence.” The persevering guest will learn that Sonnabend posited that memory is an illusion. Accordingly, both conceptions of the past, such as memory and forgetting, and inklings of the future, such as premonition and *déjà vu*, stem from the same cognitive response to experience. “We, amnesiacs all,” Sonnabend wrote, “condemned to live in an eternally fleeting present, have created the most elaborate of human constructions, memory, to buffer ourselves against the intolerable knowledge of the irreversible passage of time and the irretrievability of its moments and events” (Worth). A series of glass-encased models gives physical form to the notion Sonnabend called “the cone of obliscence.” As cap, coda, or elegant semi-sequitur, another vitrine presents a plate of madeleines, one minus a dainty nibble, augmented by a paragraph from Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*, and—added bonus—little brass flaps allowing a literal sniff at the scent of memory.

In the Delani/Sonnabend Halls guests once again confront the sheer weight of history. One finds no formal introduction announcing, “Welcome to an Exhibit on the Nature of Memory.” Neither does the exhibit present theories that are, in themselves, convincing. As in the case of the X-ray bat, the museum makes little attempt to convince the reader that memory is but an illusion or that there is a science to premonition. There is little to persuade the skeptic or to educate the ill-informed. What there is, is story. As presented in the museum, Sonnabend's theory stands almost entirely on foundations of narrative. The accounts of the neuroscientist, his father, and the singer supply the basis for belief. These histories are so compelling, so detailed, so improbably ordinary, that they assume a mantle of credibility.

Here again visitors may revel in the museum's play between the expected and the obvious. Seen this way, the stories of Sonnabend, Delani, and "theories of forgetting" appear within an ostensibly authoritative space, a museum, which spawns and incubates disbelief; yet, on their face, these stories can hardly be believed. The gap produces a cognitive dissonance that, for some, is downright delightful. Those who love a good in-joke and revel in layers of reference may see the Proust case as a grand punchline, a glimmering witticism extending from obvious cracks about the nature of memory to the punny resonance between Proust's pastry treats and Madame Delani's first name.

If there is a joke, however, it is told in a Steven Wright deadpan. The museum's earnestness has pushed more than a few to seek outside verification of its claims. Weschler and Crane, both of whom have put their thoughts about Wilson's museum into book form, spent hours scouring university libraries and worldwide catalogs in fruitless searches for any mention of a "Geoffrey Sonnabend," "obliscence," or "Madelena Delani." The paths led only back to the museum itself. Weschler pressed David Wilson directly on the matter of the exhibit's genesis only to meet politely intractable obfuscation. Wilson's response was "ornate, almost profuse, in some of its details, but then suddenly fogging over," ultimately ending inconclusively. (Weschler 32) (By all accounts Wilson is polite, affable, and friendly. A brief encounter I had with him concerning the lack of paper in the toilet squared with that assessment. And yet he remains taciturn, if not inscrutable, concerning the museum itself.) Eventually the journalist found some strands of the story fraying, such as in the moment when Wilson's daughter revealed that one of the artifacts in the Delani case was "my necklace when I was a baby" (Weschler 34, 55). Crane, in contrast, embraced the incongruity, complementing her own contribution to the edited volume, *Museums and Memory*, with a verbatim encapsulation of "obliscence" courtesy of the Museum of Jurassic Technology itself.

History's charms do not only serve the interests of the chimerical, however. The museum also employs history as a strategic device to present unquestionably real phenomena. Reverently-lit dioramas presenting Southern California trailer parks gain meaning through a narrative of their origins, titled "Development of the Land Ark." Oil paintings of Soviet space dogs are introduced with the historian's standard opening line, the date: "On November 3, 1957 . . ." the flawlessly printed placard intones. The story of Hagop Sandaljjan's childhood opens an exhibit of his microscopic sculptures. Ricky Jay writes a history to accompany the specimens of his decaying dice.<sup>2</sup>

There are exceptions. Some exhibits give little to no history to their stories. These tend to present artifacts or facts that are, in themselves, fantastic. A set of cosmologically-inventive letters sent to the Mount Wilson Observatory carries virtually no explanation or analysis.<sup>3</sup> The case containing a model of the very real *Megalaponara foetens*, or “Stinkant of the Cameroon,” tells of its susceptibility to a vicious brain-eating fungus, but provides nothing on pioneering naturalists or dates of discovery. No obvious standard governs the museum’s exhibits. For that matter, some exhibits seem to have nothing to them at all, such as the seemingly anchorless label affixed to one wall that states simply and enigmatically, “Asia (including the Pacific Islands).” In most cases, throughout the building, history is at work.

Even as the museum builds histories that substantiate its claims, it interrogates the nature of history itself, particularly respecting the discipline’s limits. The visitor confronts the limitations of historical knowledge from literally the first encounter with the exhibit space. Immediately to the left of the entrance, text on the wall labeled simply “The Siege and Battle of Pavia, Fig. 74, catalogue No. 263” discusses the impossibility of knowing what happened at Pavia at some undisclosed moment. Other than that there was a siege and a battle at the city of Pavia, the text reveals little. There is no discussion of the year in which the events occurred, the battle’s context, or even the combatants. Instead, the subject appears to be the impossibility of truly knowing what happened in the past. The script states, *in toto*:

The circumstances of the formerly celebrated Siege and Battle of Pavia have been set out by eyewitnesses and participants; it has been imaginatively reconstructed by artists, known and forgotten alike, in paintings and woodcuts, in the series of woven tapestries completed in 1531 after drawings by Bernard van Orley, and in a drawing by Wolf Huber. So contradictory is the written evidence and so various must have been the motives of those who commissioned, or speculated in, the publication of these battle-pieces, that it is not easy to reconcile the pictures and prints. A recent account of the siege and battle of Pavia hardly refers to the pictorial renderings of it, and tacitly implies that this evidence is, therefore, valueless. It is clear that not one of the artists visited the site, the former royal walled park or irregular shape.

Arguably, the “Siege and Battle of Pavia” may be the best possible introduction to a space filled with multivalent types of knowledge. This is neither a discussion of Pavia nor a historiographical

assessment. At best, it offers a meditation on the nature of history itself, concluding by undermining the notion that we can have faith in anything it tells us. Simultaneously authoritative and vague, it is the Emperor's New Clothes for didacts. With that cautionary introduction, the museum then moves blithely forward, employing history all the way.

While reading about Pavia, the new visitor cannot help but overhear the museum's actual introduction, a slide show explaining its place within a history of collection and display tracing back to Noah's Ark. The tale positions the Museum of Jurassic Technology as another temple for the Muses. For centuries, one hears, thoughtful people have collected artifacts exemplifying the important and remarkable of earth's nature. From Biblical times through the Enlightenment to the turn of the nineteenth century, scholars and kings kept and showed their curiosities to those who desired knowledge. In republican North America, homegrown intellectuals such as Charles Wilson Peale assembled collections for the cultivation of "rational amusement" for more public audiences. Unfortunately, the rise of the commercial museum comprising "oddities, unencumbered by scientific purpose" threatened doom to the proper museum. Typified by Phineas T. Barnum, who "contained, scattered, and ultimately incinerated" Peale's collection, crass showmen brought an end to the distinguished line of true curators. The show concludes with the assertion that the Museum of Jurassic Technology has returned to the original intent of the museum, bringing forth its own special understanding of the world through the presentation of special objects and items that convey "life in the lower Jurassic" ([www.mjt.org/intro/main2./html](http://www.mjt.org/intro/main2./html)).

Raising Barnum's ghost highlights the museum's cultural work by signaling that which it decidedly does *not* do. Taken at face value, the museum's story suggests that it has recovered a thread lost, perhaps cut, by the likes of P. T. Barnum. As with so many of the museum's claims, that contention obscures the great debts it owes to Barnum and his ilk. Barnum once dealt and the museum continues to trade in the currency of wonder; the divergence lies in their different approaches to the presentation of wonder. The museum strives to make the impossible plausible through a strategy of hushed reverence; in contrast, Barnum trumpeted, literally begging the public to pay for the right to authenticate the marvels he put on display.

P. T. Barnum made his first fortune as a promoter exhibiting the odd and unusual. His most successful ventures directly engaged questions of reality and falsehood. Barnum appealed to both his audience's sense of wonder and a democrat's belief that the individual should be able to determine truth for him or herself. In 1835 he toured with Joice Heth, an enslaved woman who he claimed was George Washington's one-hundred-and-sixty-one year old wet nurse. Heth reportedly

sang songs, told stories about Washington's childhood, and answered the audience's questions. At first Barnum asserted that Heth provided her own proof of his claims; as her audiences began to wane, the impresario found he could leverage doubt to his advantage. He submitted pseudonymous letters to newspapers denying her story, her age and her very humanity. One planted response suggested that Heth was merely a "curiously constructed automaton, made up of whalebone, India-rubber, and numberless springs" (qtd in Harris 23). The letters spawned public debate, and the greater the controversy, the more tickets Barnum sold. When Heth died in 1836, Barnum sold fifteen hundred tickets to her public autopsy. In response to the presiding doctor's claim that the woman could have been no more than eighty years old, Barnum questioned the doctor's credibility (Harris 25).

In 1841, Barnum purchased the remains of Scudder's American Museum, which had fallen on hard times after the founder's death. Barnum augmented the hoard with the collection that Charles Wilson Peale had assembled in his Philadelphia museum and opened "Barnum's American Museum" at the corner of Broadway and Ann, just a block south of New York's City Hall. This museum, which burned in 1865, is the one to which the Museum of Jurassic Technology's slide show refers as the peak of an "unsavory tendency" in museums that forsook true knowledge in favor of profits ([www.mjt.org/intro/main2.html](http://www.mjt.org/intro/main2.html)).

Barnum's assemblage differed substantially in goal, if not in content, from that of his predecessors. Scudder and Peale had imagined that their presentations of natural wonders and exemplary specimens would produce a higher level of thought and acculturation in the new nation. Barnum merely hoped that people would pay to look at all the cool stuff. His purpose was to make money; he was no educator. Still, he found that a veneer of respectability and edification increased the museum's appeal. Printed museum guides paid lip service to high ideals; the 1850 guide to the museum declared, "Untiring in his endeavors to cater worthily for general instruction and amusement, [Mr. Barnum] has, either by himself or through his accredited agents abroad, purchased specimens of Nature and of Art from every country under the sun." Visitors viewed such objects as busts of famous men, examples of foreign clothing styles, a rock crystal "weighing 112 pounds," stuffed animals, and hundreds of other "amusing" and "instructive" artifacts ("Barnum's American Museum Illustrated" 1).

Barnum's museum comprised more than just a collection of objects. A "lecture room" (so named because genteel ladies still avoided attending "theaters" without male accompaniment) presented ostensibly "moral" plays and concerts, in addition to other types of entertainment. He later recalled his hunt for "industrious fleas, automatons, jugglers, ventriloquists, living statuary,

tableaux, gypsies, albinos, fat boys, giants, dwarfs, rope-dancers, dioramas, panoramas, models of Niagara, Dublin, Paris, and Jerusalem . . . anything that might divert the stream of Broadway pedestrians into the building” (qtd in Harris 40). He searched not merely for attractions, but for more exciting ones.

The impresario continued to put forward exhibitions that played on the public’s willingness to believe. His enormously profitable relationship with the “Feejee Mermaid” epitomized the strategy. In 1842, Barnum entered into a partnership with Moses Kimball, the owner of an oddity consisting of a monkey’s torso sewn to a fish’s tail. Kimball owned the “mermaid” but Barnum knew how to promote it. Assuring the public that he had purchased a real mermaid captured in the South Pacific, Barnum invited local reporters to examine the artifact before it went on public display. He then invited the skeptical to determine for themselves whether they were seeing something truly half-human, half-marine.

Barnum explicitly played up and played upon questions of authenticity. Soon after the first announcements appeared, Barnum placed advertisements and letters to the editor signed by various “doctors” disputing the authenticity of the “Feejee Mermaid” and begging townspeople to avoid the exhibition. The wily entrepreneur then placed rebuttal advertisements asking merely that the public see for itself and make its own judgment. The strategy played directly to an audience increasingly willing to place more trust in democratic common sense than in ethereally-minded elites. As Barnum’s advertisement for the attraction prompted, “Who is to decide when *doctors disagree?*” [emphasis in original].<sup>4</sup> Resulting storms of dispute only spelled more profits. Presumably folks received as much pleasure from the satisfaction of seeing through a hoax as from as from encountering a genuine mermaid.<sup>5</sup> Not everyone enjoyed the joke. Historian Kenneth S. Greenberg opens his exploration of antebellum southern culture by discussing the almost-violent dispute between newspaper editors in Charleston, South Carolina over the “Feejee Mermaid.” As Greenberg points out in *Honor and Slavery: Lies, Duels, Noses, Masks, Dressing as a Woman, Gifts, Strangers, Humanitarianism, Death, Slave Rebellions, the Proslavery Argument, Baseball, Hunting, and Gambling in the Old South*, a culture obsessed with notions of honor found Barnum’s insincerity less than amusing.

As the Museum of Jurassic Technology laments, Barnum made a fortune exhibiting objects of dubious validity with little concern for real knowledge. His success derived in large part from his ability to sensationalize. Another presumably crass businessman, Robert Ripley, also became rich by asking the public to wonder. Demanding people to “Believe It or Not!,” Ripley pulled in the opposite direction from Barnum’s, but he did it with similar style.

Robert Ripley's prolific career began with a regular cartoon focused on sports. When "Champs and Chumps" failed to encompass everything that interested him, he changed titles to "Believe It or Not!," eventually building a multi-media empire on the presentation of the odd, the unusual, and the superlative. His engagement of the audience's credulity echoed Barnum's, but whereas Barnum had no interest in an object's authenticity, just its curiosity, Ripley looked for items that were astonishing and yet verifiably real. As his biographer Edward Meyer explains, "Ripley was willing to tell a half-truth," provoking interest by giving only part of the story. The payoff, however, was the surprising revelation that what once seemed unbelievable was actually true. The company Robert Ripley founded still firmly asserts the authenticity of everything it exhibits. Today, more than twenty-five Odditoriums worldwide invite the paying public to wonder at the improbable made even more jaw-dropping because it is so very possible. As company president Robert Masterson explains, "It's that unusual nature that has kept us in business so long. The fact that everything we show is true and is genuine has kept us around" (Elliott). Without that core, the amazement has no payoff.

Both Barnum and Ripley took personal pleasure in discrepancies between the seeming and the real. They enjoyed jokes built on half-truths. Barnum told how he bested a man who won money by betting unwitting marks that they did not have even a whole shirt on their backs. Normally, the bar bet concluded with the man pointing out that one wears only half a shirt on the back; the other half is on one's front. The showman, however, went one better by folding up an entire shirt that he concealed under his jacket (Barnum 77-8). For Yankees like Barnum, this was the essence of a fairly administered practical joke. In similar fashion, Robert Ripley loved to tell of furor he stirred up by claiming that Charles Lindbergh was actually the sixty-seventh man to fly across the Atlantic. The cartoonist glibly responded to the doubters that Lindbergh was the first to do it solo, but three score others had gone across with partners or in dirigibles. Like Barnum, Ripley was attracted to the slippage between the obvious and the accurate. His Odditoriums extend that sensibility, putting forward artifacts that arouse wonder based on the promise that, sure enough, seemingly unbelievable things are actually true.

The Museum of Jurassic Technology stands as something of a mirror image of Ripley's Odditoriums. Whereas Ripley's venues strive to create wonder and excitement from the odd and unusual, David Wilson's museum takes pains to remain muted, serious, and subdued. The Museum of Jurassic Technology's unironic irony plays directly against expectations raised by Ripley's Odditoriums and other such places that plead for the visitor's amazement. The museum

demarcates itself from them by presenting items as astonishing as the *Deprong Mori* in a staid, matter-of-fact manner. Nevertheless, the Museum of Jurassic Technology puts belief at play every bit as much as Barnum and Ripley did. Where both Barnum and Ripley loudly demanded the visitor consider the nature of truth and belief, the Museum of Jurassic Technology puts forward its queries surreptitiously. Moreover, it aims at a smaller, rarefied slice of the ticket-buying public. Its prime targets are those who take for granted that museum's function in particular, standard ways. For these people—us people—truth literally has a form.

The question of belief dogs those who fancy themselves deep thinkers. Consider a series of essays for the *New York Times* in which filmmaker Errol Morris recounts his obsessive search for the truth behind a pair of photographs taken by an early photographer of the Crimean War. The photographs show a road bombarded by Russian cannon. In one of them, the cannonballs sit alongside the road in the ditches. In another, the road is strewn with cannonballs, suggesting the danger to anyone passing that way, particularly intrepid photographers. Susan Sontag and others argue that photographer Roger Fenton placed the cannonballs onto the road in the latter picture. Thus, they maintain, even in photography's earliest days humans behind the camera manipulated the environment to “enhance” reality. Morris, however, doubted that critique; perhaps the photographer had not manipulated the scenes at all; perhaps contemporary analysts, steeped in a world of photographic manipulation, *wanted* to believe that the images had been staged. Thus, the viewer's expectations fundamentally shape what one sees because one expects to see it in that way. Morris's claim is more than simply Heisenberg's uncertainty principle at work; it is not merely that truth depends on how one measures it. Instead, it is truly that one will see what one already believes to be true. As Morris summarized it, “Believing is seeing.”

The Museum of Jurassic Technology plays on Morris's principle by making the unbelievable visible in such a way that it invites acceptance. It is as if the museum plays a grand confidence game with the very notion of authenticity at stake. Style enhances the confidence game. The museum reminds the visitor that the form of the information we receive affects our willingness to accept it.

Audiences trained to exercise their critical faculties may believe themselves immune to the powers of packaging. Yet, especially when it comes to museums, style matters as much as substance to even the most erudite. Consider, for instance, that when the Creation Museum opened in Petersburg, Kentucky, critics worried less that some creationists had opened a museum than that they used engaging, contemporary exhibits to show Adam and Eve frolicking with dinosaurs. Presumably well-crafted, attractive, and entertaining exhibits made such heretical

notions seem more plausible to a potentially gullible public (Rothstein). The Creation Museum’s motto, “Prepare to Believe,” reveals the extent to which the curators understand the power of their presentation ([www.creationmuseum.org](http://www.creationmuseum.org)).

Although the Museum of Jurassic Technology has very different goals, its methods echo those of its Kentucky kin. If anything, it packages information designed to toy with and amuse the intellectually sophisticated. It imparts bits of knowledge information in forms adhering to one’s generic expectations of museum *qua* museum. It takes for granted that the visitor walking in a building called “museum” is already prepared to believe. As such, that information carries an aura of authenticity. Well-cultivated visitors finding objects in glass cases resting next to authorless text have been trained to accord the whole a measure of belief. When names, dates, places, and Latinate constructions pepper lengthy, well-paragraphed text, it is even easier to imagine that there must be something to it. An aura of authenticity suffuses the artifacts and information so presented.

Leveraging the accoutrements of language and style to invoke the “Platonic ideal” of a museum even as it passes off falsehoods, the Museum of Jurassic Technology embodies McLuhan’s dictum—its message is its medium. Whereas most museums use buildings, vitrines, text, and artifacts as media for imparting particular kinds of knowledge, in the Museum of Jurassic Technology presentation becomes content. The museum evidences little concern for proving that an X-ray bat exists, could exist, or even that it would be cool if it did. A lot of effort, however, has been devoted to enfoldng the story in elements conducive to belief. The same holds true for Sonnabend’s theory of “obliscence”—the museum puts more emphasis on telling the story than making sure that the visitor understands the concepts.

Where other museums speak to modernist sensibilities, the Museum of Jurassic Technology offers a kind of postmodernist amusement. The postmodern project can be considered, in part, as a drive to reconceptualize and re-present the world in such a way that presentation itself becomes central to the production of knowledge. As Jean-Francois Lyotard put it, “The postmodern would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself . . . it must be clear that it is our business not to supply reality but to invent allusions to the conceivable which cannot be presented” (340-41). The Museum of Jurassic Technology follows the line of Lyotard’s reasoning, and goes further. Not only does it “invent allusions to the conceivable,” the museum moves on to present the unrepresentable in the drab garb of the official, the accepted, the mundanely authoritative—upending the modernist project in a manner that posts the postmodern.

Postmodernists, like Jean Baudrillard, might begin a serious quest for cultural import at the Las Vegas strip or Disneyland. But for intellectually satisfying delight, a high-minded hootenanny as it were, the post-post-minded can turn to few places that satisfy as much as the Museum of Jurassic Technology.

Watching patrons walk through the museum, one notices that not everyone participates with the same level of enjoyment. More than a few readers never make it to the point of understanding how the bat became embedded in the lead wall. Most folks never listen to the entire explanation of Sonnabend's theory. As is true with most museums, it is the rare patron who absorbs every line of text, fully ponders the intricacies of each case, and pauses to reflect on the connections between the institution's seemingly disparate exhibits. The effort spent on making the Museum of Jurassic Technology look precisely as one would expect a museum to look often produces the effect one often finds in museums—polite curiosity leading to spikes of intent interest followed soon after by rapidly diminishing attention. In short, many patrons do not make the effort necessary to recognize the clever slippages, in-jokes, and moments of wonder that give the museum's fans such pleasure.

For that matter, many who put in the effort to experience the museum remain immune to its charms. Although the Museum of Jurassic Technology receives overwhelmingly laudatory press coverage, plenty of visitors leave nonplussed, even unhappy. Some find its contents silly, while others believe the boring is just plain boring. Still others resent feeling as if they have been made victims of a bizarre hoax. While writing this essay I asked an academic friend to look over the *Deprong Mori* section on the museum's website; simply reading the material infuriated her.

For those who love it, however, the Museum of Jurassic Technology provides a rare pleasure. Like some embodied witticism or living koan, it stands as a tangible reminder of the knowledge we take for granted. Inside, the know-it-all becomes the know-nothing. By enveloping both the questionable and definite in the garments of authenticity—a wardrobe made especially convincing because it is woven from histories both faux and firm—the museum rouses doubts that breed further curiosity. Ultimately, because it asks visitors to accept the unbelievable, the Museum of Jurassic Technology provokes the question of whether anything one sees is true—and whether it matters. The answer may be that what truly matters is that we once again ask the question and learn anew the value of wonder.

## NOTES

1. For discussion of the evolution from *Wunderkammer* to museum, see Paula Findlen, *Possessing Nature: Museums, Collecting, and Scientific Culture in Early Modern Italy* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994). For more extensive discussions of the nature of museums, see Daniel Sherman and Irit Rogoff, eds., *Museum Culture: Histories, Discourses, Spectacles* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1994) and Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (London: Routledge, 1995). See also Donna Haraway, “Teddy Bear Patriarchy: Taxidermy in the Garden of Eden, New York City, 1908-1936,” in *Culture/Power/History: A Reader in Contemporary Social Theory*, eds. Nicholas B. Dirks, Geoff Eley, and Sherry B. Ortner (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 49-95.
2. For Ricky Jay’s dice, see Ricky Jay and Rosamond Wolff Purcell, *Dice: Deception, Fate, and Rotten Luck* (New York: Quantuck Lane Press, 2002).
3. The letters so intrigued the curators of a Royal College of Art exhibit called “This Much is Certain,” that they included examples of the letters verbatim in their catalog. See Miriam Bäckström, Daniel Baker, *et al.*, *This Much is Certain* (London: Royal College of Art, 2004).
4. P. T. Barnum, advertisement for the “Feejee Mermaid,” reproduced in Arthur H. Saxon, *P.T. Barnum: The Legend and the Man* (New York: Columbia University Press), 122.
5. For Barnum’s own account of the “Feejee Mermaid,” see P. T. Barnum, *Struggles and Triumphs* (New York: Arno Press, 1970).

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