

THE CURATOR'S TALE, PART 1: HOW THE MUSEUM CAME TO BE

[This is the history of the museum as of 2006. Part 2 has yet to be written. -- Ed. note]



Richardson Grove Visitor Center

EARLY INFLUENCES

I spent my very first days in a museum. Around the time I was born, my father was employed as a naturalist at Richardson Grove State Park, nestled among California's redwood groves. The only housing available for park rangers at the time was in the back of the park's visitor center. The visitor center was originally a 3-room cabin; the living room had been converted into a museum and the remaining living quarters reserved for use as a seasonal park ranger residence. It was full of taxidermied animals and left an unconscious imprint on my tenderly impressionable brain cells. The building has since been demolished, probably around 1960.

When my father became a biology teacher in San Francisco, I would tag along on class field trips. My favorites were the tide pools, which seemed to me like the edge of a vast unknown world, completely strange and alien, yet undeniably real. Another fascinating destination was the California Academy of Sciences in Golden Gate Park with its aquarium of strange fish and amphibians, its collection of meteorites and giant mineral

specimens, and its natural history dioramas. I especially liked the smaller, more intimate dioramas, which might be just a family of flying squirrels, looking out from their nest high up in a tree.



The Rainbow Jewel from Another Planet

THE BOYHOOD MUSEUM

I was inspired to create my own little natural history museum and zoo. I had collections of rocks, fossils, beetles, bird nests, shells, and other marine life. I also had chemicals, arrowheads, astronomical charts, and a stamp collection. The zoo included locally caught lizards and snakes, frogs raised from tadpoles, a store-bought turtle, and the occasional butterfly or moth. I liked the idea of being an “amateur naturalist.”

The objects in the museum were all faithfully identified, labeled, and catalogued, and the original catalog still survives today*. However, there were a couple of objects in the museum that carried the seeds of more fanciful approach to collecting. They were inspired by Superman’s museum in his Fortress of Solitude which included an alien zoo, souvenirs of his exploits and his trips to exotic places, and, most interesting to me, an entire miniature city in a bottle. One item that I had in my original museum was a bar of some kind of metal that was much softer

[*See p. 51 - Ed. note]

than it looked. I bent it into an “S” shape and pretended that it was something that Superman himself might have created and displayed as a museum exhibit. The other was a small, multicolored chunk of melted material that I imagined was some sort of mysterious extraterrestrial artifact, possibly related to the “rainbow jewel from another planet” in Superman’s museum. The “S” bar is long lost, but the rainbow jewel has survived through the years and is now on view in the Zymoglyphic Museum atop its own little pedestal, framed in the style of a viewing stone, .

My original museum, from when I was about 10 or 11, primarily included natural history objects, such as shells, rocks, and the occasional animal skin. However, like any decent curiosity cabinet, it also included cultural artifacts: arrowheads, kachina dolls, some square nails, and a worldwide stamp album. The stamps gave me a sense of connection to faraway, exotic places and collecting them created a sort of microcosm of the world. I was especially fascinated by the tiny, independent republics and principalities of Europe and idyllic scenes from isolated topical islands. The stamps of Africa and Oceania introduced me to romantic images of tribal art and lifestyles. My goal was to collect a stamp from every country in the world. I eventually lost interest in collecting stamps when exotic-sounding places like Bhutan, Tonga, and various Arabian sheikdoms started issuing gimmicky stamps which were clearly aimed at collectors and had no connection to their own cultures.

In my early teens, I hit on a more conceptual version of the stamp collection, which was to collect languages. I would choose a word and translate it into as many languages as possible. This was similar to stamp collecting in that it connected me with many exotic and far away cultures. It had the added dimension of connection to the ancient world as well. Postage stamps go back to the mid-nineteenth century, and ancient coins were hard to come by, but with a language collection, I could have a little sample of Egyptian hieroglyphs or Assyrian cuneiform from thousands of years ago. Also, old stamps from Africa or Oceania are really colonial inventions, not really of the people themselves, where a collection of indigenous languages represents that culture much

better.

This collecting was done long before the internet existed, so it consisted of hunting through the stacks of any library I happened to be near, find section 490 (Other Languages) and seeing if they had some dictionaries of as-yet-uncollected languages.



Oceanographic Museum, Monaco, 1964

DAYS OF ADVENTURE

When I was 14, I went with my family on an extended car camping tour of Europe. Much of it was fascinating - ruins, cathedrals, towns. But the thing I devoted most space to were the museums, whose contents I listed in great detail in my diary of the trip. One image from the trip that stands out in my mind is a gigantic spider crab mounted on the wall of the Oceanographic Museum in Monaco.

Another trip that stands out around this time was the Seattle World's Fair in 1962, especially the vast "Hall of Science" exhibit. That, and a book I picked up there called *One Two Three.. Infinity* by George Gamow, introduced me to the wondrous world of subatomic physics, relativity, entropy, probability, cosmology, and the creation of life from inorganic molecules.

"Walden" was one of my favorite books in high school. It pro-

vided a mythic and spiritual dimension to nature that transcended the mere collecting, naming, and classifying of specimens, which had been the focus of my original museum. The summer between high school and college, I even tried a brief emulation of Thoreau's year-long stay at Walden pond. I camped out by myself for four days on an island in the middle of a small mountain lake in Olympic National Park. I paddled out to the island on a primitive boat made by tying driftwood logs together, read *Walden*, and wrote a short journal, trying to emulate Thoreau's 19th century style.

By the end of high school, the zoo's inhabitants had died or gone their own ways, and the museums collections were packed away or left to decay. An inventory of my closet contents shows its remains.*

In high school and college, I drifted away from the sciences. I knew that I would have to choose a specialty, and since I found all aspects of science equally fascinating, that seemed an impossible task. Also, even with all the unimaginable wonder revealed by physics and biology, I still needed the non-literal and imaginative. Literature and soft sciences such as sociology and psychology offered the promise of insight into the meaning of life, which science, being literal and descriptive, did not.

One new interest was art, especially surrealism, which I took to immediately. It made strangeness significant and even legitimate. I also got absorbed in mythology, Jungian psychology, and science fiction, enjoying stories of other worlds and supernatural forces. I had no religious background, so these ideas seemed to fill a void.

We had a short-lived "Fred Gallery" at college, from a standing joke: "Is it Art? No, it's Fred". The gallery was in an unused phone booth in the dormitory. People would contribute objects like dead roaches or old food that had gotten weird. It was an ironic and humorous approach to art. Unfortunately, a catalog was never issued.



Sand tray diorama

CREATIVE STIRRINGS

As I later pursued careers in health care and data visualization, some events occurred that awakened my creativity. In my mid 20's I found a piece of driftwood that looked to me like a miniature landscape. I added some shells and small crystals to it to enhance the effect. One object I added was a limpet shell that seemed to look like a little cathedral. Later, I put an old clock on a plant stand and added a doll arm and a crab claw to create my own "surrealist object."

There were a number of interesting installations in the Bay Area in the 1970s that I stumbled across, which lent credence to the idea of a museum as an art project. The first was Michael McMillen's "Traveling Mystery Museum" that was installed at the San Francisco Art Institute in 1973. Next, in Port Costa, Clayton Bailey's World of Wonders (1976-1978). Finally, there was the Art Dreco Institute, a gallery on Valencia Street around 1978, which introduced me to the joys of odd thrift store objects, such as guitar-playing frogs. In the 1980s and later, the Museum of Jurassic Technology in Los Angeles grew to prominence as



Clayton Bailey's World of Wonder

the premier exemplar of a permanent, successful, idiosyncratic museum.

I liked to hang around artists during this time, but I did not think I was creative enough to actually be one. By my mid-30's I had collected a number of objects that were souvenirs of trips and odd things from thrift stores, including a number of large, strange ashtrays. I filled the ashtrays with sand and started arranging souvenirs and items from my old collections to make miniature surrealistic landscapes. My tiny bachelor apartment was soon filled with these creations. Around the same time, I started putting together the first narrative scene, called "Bug Wars," starring some little beetles and sewing machine parts, creating a post-apocalyptic drama pitting insects against machines.

My involvement in the art world got closer when, at 38, I married an artist. She was creating small fish at the time, made of metal, plastic, and found objects. By then I was creating scenes



The Quiet Parlor of the Fishes

on the mantelpiece and scenes in bookcases. I had an idea of creating an aquarium-like environment for some of Judy's fish. The result was a large, dry aquarium on a stand. I liked the idea of creating something that was an integral part of your living environment, rather than primarily for a gallery or museum. At about the same time, we got a cat and "Bug Wars" needed to be protected. So I built a clear plastic box for it and it became the first diorama.

My wife and I lived in a flat in San Francisco's Richmond District. I set up a studio in a little room in the garage and started collecting interesting objects and arranging them in 10-gallon aquarium tanks until they seemed to "glow." The quality that I looked for in the things I collected was usually something that suggests something other than what it is. An example would be a discarded candy wrapper that, when turned in a certain direction, looks like a particularly strange mushroom. I was putting

objects together intuitively, as suggested by the material, with no plan for the final outcome. The “glow” had something to do with balanced (but asymmetrical) composition and a mysterious but compelling narrative quality, a sense that there was an interesting story going on. Later, I did make up stories for the dioramas.

GETTING SERIOUS AS AN ARTIST

I was still not convinced that what I was doing really qualified as “art.” I liked the idea of dry aquariums because they could be seen more as furniture or household decoration rather than having to qualify as “art,” or, even worse, “good art.” I was neither a painter nor a sculptor, but there was a category in art called “assemblage” that seemed to fit what I was doing - taking existing objects and putting them together. However, assemblage artists generally do not make miniature scenes, so I was in my own genre. This was good because again there was nothing better or worse to compare my work with. Even if people didn’t like it or couldn’t relate to it, they could say “Well, I’ve never seen anything like that before!”

I finally decided to declare what I was doing as “art” and that I was an “artist” by joining Open Studios of San Francisco. Open Studios is open to anyone who wants to participate, and you can have people come to your home to see your work. This worked well for me, since I did not have to worry about being “accepted” and my work could be seen in its natural environment. I participated in Open Studios every year from 1989 to 1993. I usually presented my work as “exhibits from some imaginary natural history museum”. The feedback I got was generally much more encouraging than I had expected.

THE MUSEUM OPENS

In 1994, we moved to a house in San Mateo. My wife had developed a dust and mold allergy that made it undesirable to keep a lot of little (undustable) objects and organic matter in the house. Fortunately, the house has a particularly long driveway and we were able to have a shed installed in it. This building became the exhibit area and the Zymoglyphic Museum had its grand opening in April of 2000. By that time I had also set up the Web site and had begun thinking of my work in the context of an imagined world with its own history, artifacts, and mythology. In the role of museum curator, I have an alter ego to duck behind if I feel the need to be anonymous.

I have done Open Studios every year since the grand opening. Attendance is often sparse (about 20 people per weekend) but there are always some people enthusiastic enough to make it worthwhile. That and the Web site are my main ways of presenting my work to the world and getting feedback from others. My hope is that others will be able to find ways to express themselves creatively without worrying about having art skills, or whether what they do fits into some established pattern.

So, in the end, it seems I have recreated my old childhood museum, but this time it is my own personal expression, moving from a literal interpretation of nature (collecting, naming, arranging by scientifically determined category) to arrangement by intuition, symbolism, and aesthetics. Both of them originate in an appreciation of nature in its dizzying variety and basic interconnectedness. The new museum goes beyond literal realm where science must stop, to a more symbolic realm and ultimately a sort of personal cathedral.

