

THE CURATOR'S TALE,
PART 2

Recap of Part 1 (1950-2006)

The original Curator's Tale was written in 2006 for the museum's website (as "How the Museum Came to Be"). The story was reprinted in the first volume of the Zymoglyphic Anthology as "The Curator's Tale, Part I." It chronicled the development of the museum from a childhood collection of rocks, shells, beach finds, and Indian implements to assemblages of natural and rusty objects, and then to surreal dioramas, faux artifacts, and eventually a narrative context for it all.

Most people, including myself, assumed I would be a scientist when I grew up. This idea soon became problematic because science requires specialization and I found all its fields, from subatomic physics to ecology and sociology, interesting. Even all of science wasn't enough. I needed to include the arts as well, an element of creativity and imagination to complement the admittedly amazing but still bounded realm of empirical reality. Being an artist ultimately came to the rescue by offering an approach where I could synthesize anything, the more creative the better, rather than having to stick to literal facts.

The concept of a personal museum, particularly one from a parallel dimension, evolved from that mix as a way to accommodate and structure all the math, science, creativity, and literature that I wanted to pack into it.

We backtrack a bit to begin Part 2 at the dawn of the new millennium. After existing as scattered constructions in the house for a number of years, the museum now has its own little building, an 8x12 shed which huddles in the driveway of a suburban cul-de-sac. Its rusty hinges swing open once or twice a year to welcome guests during the Open Studios event, attracting maybe 20 or 30 visitors a year. I continue to assemble beach finds and other detritus into assemblages in a crowded garage workshop.

In a way, this isolation probably contributed to making the museum unique. I had no expectation that what I created would be profitable or validated by the art world. My main motivation was really self-discovery, an effort to externalize an inner

mythos. I liked the idea of creating scenes and artifacts that were dreamlike but also made of physical objects, as opposed to, say, painting, drawing, or writing about a fantasy world.

But I also did enjoy having people come by, after I got over an initial anxiety about showing the work. I wanted to find and connect with like-minded people, who were few and far between in both my work and non-work environments. Along came the Internet, which at that time was a rich mix of obsessive people with niche interests. In 2001, I acquired the zymoglyphic.org domain and set up a Web site documenting the museum's exhibits. The site was divided into Dioramas, Artifacts, Orientalia, and Curiosities. Its modest summary read:

“The museum consists of a number of miniature dioramas and a collection of interesting curiosities which have been assembled to illuminate some of the more obscure reaches of the imagination.”

It wasn't until five years later that the museum identified the currently accepted division of Zymoglyphic history into four ages. The Rust Age exhibit gathered the various artifacts that were loosely inspired by indigenous art and associated them with an imagined mythical culture. The Age of Wonder was based on a mix of Renaissance curiosity cabinets and 19th century natural history museums, whose dioramas were given a surrealist twist. The Era of Oriental Influence in a sense plays off the European fascination with the Orient, but really results from my own fascination with the way Asian cultures use nature in art (tray landscapes, bonsai, ikebana, viewing stones, and so forth) without really calling it “art.” The Modern Age started as a sort of parody of modern art and became a catch-all for things that didn't fit elsewhere. I made no attempt to develop a detailed backstory beyond those basic concepts.

The museum's blog debuted late in 2005, and 2006 was a peak year for blogging. I used the blog for announcements, reports on places, events, and artists that I considered zymoglyphic, and short personal essays. The format was to have at least one striking image at the top, followed by some literary prose making

interesting connections about relevant topics. I spent a lot of weekends wordsmithing and link-checking my posts. The blog was updated weekly for a while, then monthly, then once or twice a year. The attrition was mostly due to lack of response.

A proliferation of media

My natural medium is spontaneous assemblage, particularly of natural (or weathered artificial) objects. I like to find objects that have potential, often something that does not look like what it actually is. I arrange my finds in three-dimensional space, moving them around until they “glow.” I’m happy with this process and generally not interested in learning any techniques or practicing to make perfect.

However, my first blog entry was an announcement of a set of acrylic paintings that came out of a class I had attended. I was essentially laying out acrylic paint and water on masonite held flat, then swishing it around as the pigment settles, often in complex branchy patterns. I made six of them that I really liked.

Some years later I decided to try spontaneous drawing, starting with a blank sheet of paper, making some random marks, then filling in with whatever came to mind. Invariably they turned out to be surrealist landscapes. I created about 20 of them that I liked over the course of a few months. The inspiration dried up after that, but I liked the good ones enough to publish them as a book.

Another year I got inspired to create collages from old engravings. I created a few dozen of them in Photoshop over the course of a year or so. Being digital, they can be printed out easily and indefinitely. I have never believed in the idea of limited editions. I think if someone enjoys the images, they should be able to have one. I sell the prints in the museum shop and they have proven to be very popular over the years. I still get a thrill from the idea of someone framing one and hanging it on their wall.

I had always been fascinated by animation, whether stop-motion, hand-drawn, or computer-generated, but I did not have the patience to actually create one. I discovered that the Photoshop layers that made up the collages could be fed into

software that would allow you to move them around and fly a virtual camera through the resulting landscape. The result is now a Modern Age exhibit.

More digital magic! My father, a dedicated do-it-yourselfer, self-published a wildflower guide in the pre-digital era. This involved meticulous film photography, large production runs, and driving to bookstores to fulfill orders. Nowadays a book can all be laid out on a computer, uploaded to a printing company, and exactly however many books you needed would show up on your doorstep. My first publication, in 2010, was “the museum in a book”—photographs of the artifacts, exhibits, and collections. Soon after, I created books from the collage prints and the drawings. As with the prints, I am excited when people buy the books. I like the thought of them sitting on someone’s library shelf, perhaps retrieved on occasion for reference or inspiration.

Yet another medium presented itself when my wife created a postcard for the museum. I got inspired and created a dozen more. You can take them as little works of mail art or just souvenirs of an interesting place you have visited. Like physical books, I liked the idea of these little missives working their way through the delivery system, sent by someone who had to put on a stamp and mail it.

Postage stamps have always been a part of my collections along with the various natural objects. In a way, they don’t seem to fit. As a child, my collection was focused on exotic places, and the idea of a microcosm that encapsulated the whole world. Later I added stamps from made up countries. I liked that they seemed to be physical manifestations of imaginary regions. Once the notion of a Zymoglyphic region existed, it seemed just logical to design and issue a few postage stamps for it!

The Great Transition - On to Portland!

The San Mateo version of the museum trundled along for a few years in the early twenty-teens, continuing the Open Studios tradition and hosting a few other events. I added a little museum shop to sell books, prints, and postcards. I took to the road to sell

a few books and prints, gave a talk at the local Obscura Society, had some sketchers come through.

The museum closed without fanfare in May of 2014, after its last Open Studios event. I retired in January of that year and we moved to Portland in July. I immediately took to it. It seemed a mossy garden of Eden, soaked by nourishing rain and gray skies, harboring a bumper crop of creatives and sympathetic institutions. There were people who wanted to hang out in cafes and pubs to talk about art, literature, and philosophy instead of TV programs, sports, and stock prices. There were people with grand but personal creative projects. I was especially drawn to the Faux Museum (now gone), Curious Gallery (discontinued), and the Kayak Museum (still going strong).

I tried to set up a temporary mini-museum in an appropriately leaky and rundown detached garage of the place we were renting, but it did not go well. I ended up moving it to a rented studio in Portland's Eastside Industrial district. I devoted some of the new space to a gallery showing other people's work.

My career as a gallery owner was short-lived, however. I did not actually want to run a gallery, having to judge other people's work, and dealing with organizing openings. Besides, I had a new space to set up.

The new museum opens to great acclaim!

We finally purchased a home in May of 2016 with a two-story detached garage that became the museum's new location. I transported the remaining exhibits from San Mateo and the temporary location to the new place and created some new exhibits. The new museum opened without fanfare and greeted its first visitors on November 17, 2016. More people visited in the first few months than in the whole 14 years in the Bay Area. The local alternatively weekly listed it in their "Best of Portland" issue of 2017.

2018 was a banner year in many ways. In the spring, a high school student in Florida had become enamored of the museum via its website. He flew out with his mother to film a mini-



The new museum

documentary about the museum. In March, Atlas Obscura sponsored a Zymoglyphic-themed mushroom tasting at the museum. A seven year old girl visited late that year and wrote a “Kid’s Guide to the Museum,” still one of the museum’s most popular publications. The museum was written up on the local glossy lifestyle monthly, the neighborhood high school newspaper, and an in-flight airline magazine. Five star reviews proliferated on social media. Blog entries were made. Locals and tourists alike declared “I love that place!”

One day, Feb. 11, 2018 to be exact, a Facebook posting announcing the open day showed 57 people going and 574 interested. It had a “reach” of 17,000. 124 people showed up that day and it was very unpleasant. I wanted to shut the door and lock it; I got flustered with so many people wanting my attention to buy something or ask a question. I stopped doing any active publicity after that. I got the museum removed from a popular list of “things to do with kids.” To date, I have turned down three requests from local TV stations wanting to do stories

featuring the museum.

I still welcome attention from bloggers, print publications, scholars, and any genuine enthusiast who has been to the museum and wants to write about it. Photography is encouraged and has resulted in lots of great photos on social media. I especially welcome those inspired to create works of art based on the museum.

The sort of inspired attention the museum garnered in 2018 fell off abruptly after January of the following year. There was still a steady stream of visitors, many enthusiastic, but few spontaneous projects coming out of it.

Books

I declared 2019 the year of the book(s)! Just as the museum's internet presence was an attempt to reach beyond the geographical borders of the physical museum, so I saw books as a way to reach across time as perhaps the most durable storage medium short of clay tablets. I also thought it would be fun to add book publisher to my retirement resume. Books appeal to me as compact repositories of knowledge, images, wisdom, and even world view. They are a nice, solid compromise between the ungainly, fragile physical presence of the museum and its insubstantial doppelganger on the internet.

The first book out of the chute was a collaboration of sorts. A friend and writer whose style I admire was in need of some work, so I commissioned him to write a book in August of 2019. It was to be zymoglyphic-themed but otherwise I gave him no specific direction. The result, *Hotel Zymoglyphic* by Jason Squamata, was not at all what I had expected - a loosely connected set of poems instead of an extended prose piece. It has turned out well, however; it's a book I can dip into over and over, rather than read once and be done. It even came with a spoken word version that added a whole new dimension to it.

The second book that year was *The Zymoglyphic Anthology*. I had printed up a lot of brochures over the years and they were taking over the museum shop, so I thought I would compile them

into a single volume. I added in some historical documents, and recruited essays and zymo-based fiction, to create a wildly eclectic assemblage of documentation.

Book three is an update to the original guide to the museum, which had not been updated since it was first published in 2010. This volume is intended to be the museum in book form, a documentation of two decades worth of developing one idea in all its ramifications. It actually avoids reference to the museum as a physical location, implying that the museum itself may be a fictional construct.

The latest book, of course, is the one you are holding now. It's an organic thing, partly a repository for any essays or other writing that I do, and partly a way to connect with and encourage others to share their perspectives on the museum project.

As much as I enjoy the processing of designing and creating books, I'm not much for the sales and marketing side, so the number of books sold tends to be quite small. I generally get little if any feedback, especially compared to the physical museum. It becomes an act of faith to believe that these works are inspiring a select host of congregants and impressionable minds.

The plague hits

My ambivalence about the museum as a destination for “oddity tourism” was resolved in March of 2020 at the beginning of the international contagion that shut down all local cultural institutions as “non-essential.” It remains to be seen at press time whether this is temporary or permanent.

The last visitor to the museum the last open day (March 8) was the travel editor of the local newspaper which was (finally) doing an article on weird museums in Portland. He was visitor number 3,600. It struck me that the museum is an art project that gets covered by a travel reporter rather than an art or cultural reporter.

The museum returns to the isolation from which it came.

