

The Decline of the Natural-History Museum¹

Thomas H. Benton²

Sometimes I wonder whether I have chosen the wrong profession. How many English professors, after all, have a 6-foot-long reproduction of Rudolph Zallinger's "The Age of Reptiles" mural from Yale's Peabody Museum hanging in their home office above cabinets full of fossils, butterflies, and seashells? As a child, I was, like many kids, fascinated by dinosaurs. One of my most powerful early memories is of visiting the great hall of Philadelphia's Academy of Natural Sciences: an enormous 19th-century gallery decorated, as I recall, with wrought iron, entablatures, oak, and marble. I remember my footsteps echoing as I walked toward the polished railing behind which stood the *Hadrosaurus*, more than 20 feet tall and impossibly ancient. The mounted skeleton — brown, lacquered, and cracked, like a Rembrandt painting — revealed itself gradually as my eyes adjusted to the light. Dinosaur Hall was a temple dedicated to the wonder of creation, the aspirations of science, and the smallness of humanity in the context of geologic time.

I kept that faith, earning top grades in science courses, until my junior year of high school, when the rigors of trigonometry and physics — the empirical fetish — more or less put an end to my scientific ambitions, if not to my love of science. It surprises some people when I say that the closest cousin to science, for me, was English, because it, too, was about the cultivation of wonder and imagination.

Nowadays, when a scholarly conference brings me to Philadelphia, New York, Chicago, or Washington, I try to make a trip to their natural-history museums. But I rarely find what I am looking for. I suppose I am trying to relive my childhood. I know the past is easy to glorify, but I do not think my disappointment comes only from my tendency toward nostalgia and old-fogeyism. I think natural-history museums have changed for the worse in the last 30 years. The solitude, silence, and quasi-religious awe that I remember have been banished by throngs of screaming, barely supervised children on school trips, who pay less attention to the exhibits than they do to the gift shops and food courts. No doubt, the museums were forced into that situation by economic necessity and political demands that they cater to the broadest possible segment of the public. That means museums simplify their exhibitions rather than expect visitors to aspire to a higher level of appreciation for something outside the normal range of experience.

I remember, even as a 10-year-old, not liking the new children's annexes that were first installed back in the 70s. I felt a lit-

tle insulted, as if I was being made to watch *Sesame Street*, or spend time in a day-care center. Clearly, these "Please Touch" museums have to cater to a wide age range, but, just as it often does in the classroom, that seems to mean aiming at an ever-lowering median of knowledge, interest, and common civility.

My 7-year-old daughter also loves natural history. She likes being able to handle real fossils and touch exotic animals, but she does not like being crowded and trampled by other children who often reduce museums to something approximating life in the Hobbesian state of nature. So we have learned to avoid the so-called children's sections, even though the behavior they encourage seems to have spilled out to the rest of the museum.

Unfortunately, the Academy of Natural Sciences was a victim of the imperialism of the juvenile back in the mid-80s. Dinosaur Hall, no longer a chapel, is now brightly lit and painted in "kid-friendly" colors. The architectural details are concealed beneath wall-to-wall carpeting and plaster board.



The *Barosaurus* at the American Museum of Natural History, rearing up and defending its young from an advancing *Allosaurus*, is perhaps the greatest mounted dinosaur exhibit in the world.

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Toward the back of the hall, a dated “high tech” video installation inserts kids into a picture with dinosaurs in it, as if they were starring in *Jurassic Park*, a movie that today’s children are no more likely to have seen than the old TV show, *Land of the Lost*. The kids make ugly faces and dance while watching themselves on screen until the next group comes in and shoves them out.

Never mind that Dinosaur Hall was one of the most important sites in the institutional history of paleontology. Discovered in 1858, the academy’s *Hadrosaurus* was the first mounted dinosaur skeleton in the world. Dinomania started in Philadelphia. Now the towering *Hadrosaurus* is hunched over — in deference to current theory — and banished to an inconspicuous corner to make room for a gathering of fossil replicas designed as photo-ops. Instead of gazing up at a relic of the heroic era of Victorian science, people ignore the *Hadrosaurus* and get their picture taken with their head beneath the jaws of the scary *Giganotosaurus*, a sort of *Tyrannosaurus rex* on steroids, before going to the gift shop to buy a “sharp toothed” plush toy. See, kids, science can be fun!

But programmed “fun” is not necessarily pleasure, nor is entertainment the only means of sparking an interest in science. The people who run museums these days seem to think that children cannot enjoy quiet reflection. I suppose they think that would be elitist. As a result, decorum — once one of the key lessons of the museum for children — is replaced by the rules of the schoolyard, the serious is usurped by the cute, and thought is banished by the chatter of last decade’s high-tech gizmos.

In *Stuffed Animals & Pickled Heads: The Culture and Evolution of Natural History Museums* (Oxford, 2001), Stephen T. Asma quoted one curator from the Field Museum in Chicago: “The sad fact is that many quieter people, who put in years of good work at the Field Museum, have recently lost their jobs to more dynamic but less educated competitors. The nature of the work, hunched over tiny bugs or fossils in a hidden-away cubicle, for example, traditionally drew introverts to the curator and staff jobs. And the museum nurtured them.” Instead, the curator laments that “the current trend is for museum trustees and administrators to ignore the internal, albeit quirky, talent when staffing positions of power and go outside for M.B.A.’s who frequently don’t know anything about the nuances of the subject matter.”

Fortunately, it is still possible in some of the larger museums and the more obscure ones to find older exhibits — silent corridors of glass cases filled with specimens — that have not been ruined by the addition of push-button TV sets, cuddly mascots, and other contemporary affectations. In particular, I enjoy the animal dioramas created from the 1920s through the 1940s. Those are not mere scientific displays; they are among the most interesting and underrated art works of the 20th century. Some of them are the three-dimensional equivalents of Audubon’s *Birds of America*. Successful museum installations need not always require huge expenditures for blockbuster attractions like the Field Museum’s \$8-million *T-rex*, “Sue,” the most expensive fossil in the world (the conspicuous cost being the real attraction).

I remember that the second-best thing about the Academy of Natural Sciences, back in the 70s, was something called the “Trading Post.” It was a large display counter full of rocks, fossils, and bones. Kids could bring in specimens from their own collections and trade them for something new. I once brought in a box of ordinary seashells from the Jersey shore and exchanged them for two skulls: a cat and a rabbit, as I recall. The Trading Post always gave kids the better end of the bargain, and it kept me exploring the creeks and vacant lots in my neighborhood, discovering that nature even existed inside the city. (Those specimens are still in my cabinets, and my daughters are starting to add their own findings to the collection.)

There are also a few museums that have been preserved by benign neglect, such as the Wagner Free Institute of Science, also in Philadelphia, and the Harvard Museum of Natural History. And, I think, foremost in the United States, the American Museum of Natural History in New York has preserved, expanded, and updated itself without sacrificing too much of its history and grandeur.

In the American Museum, for example, the curators took the risk of having their enormous *Barosaurus* rear up, with its head 50 feet in the air, defending its young from an advancing *Allosaurus*. Set amid the marble columns of Roosevelt Memorial Hall, the display is awe-inspiring, perhaps the greatest mounted dinosaur in the world. The museum’s *Barosaurus* is probably bad science, but it is also an important work of public art that expresses the obligations of one generation to another in a medium that a child can appreciate as well as an adult.

Natural-history museums are not just about science. Why couldn’t the academy in Philadelphia leave Dinosaur Hall alone? Were the memories associated with that setting not worth anything to the curators? No doubt for the hard pressed natural-history museum, an alliance between science and business — i.e., entertainment, tourism, and merchandising — seems more sustainable than the old linkage between science and the humanities — i.e., art, history, and even religion, and their combined power to cultivate wonder and imagination.

On the other hand, I do admire the efforts of many natural-history museums — in particular, the American Museum in New York and the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of Natural History in Washington — to challenge their visitors, to stand up against the pressure to expunge evolution, and to defend the ideas that led to their founding.

If museums could keep in the foreground their complex, contentious, and interdisciplinary histories — while avoiding the tendency to turn themselves into theme parks and shopping malls — they might rediscover a way to honor the past and embrace the complexity of science as a social institution in a manner that respects the intelligence of visitors, old and young, from every kind of background. In the process, they might make some political enemies, jeopardize some corporate donations, and sell fewer plush toys. They might also demand more from their current audience of captive schoolchildren. And that might be a good thing, if they aren’t bankrupted in the process.

From the perspective of a long-time lover of natural history, it’s a risk worth taking.