Two-headed Calves, Unicorn Horns, and Trephined Skulls: An Essay about Beautiful Museum Monsters

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Two-headed Calves, Unicorn Horns, and Trephined Skulls:
An Essay about Beautiful Museum Monsters

“For the most part, the cabinet of curiosities was just what it said it was: odds and ends to excite wonder. Almost every collection had ‘monsters’ in it: ‘a monstrous calf with two heads’ (Grew), ‘a horned horse’ and an ‘ovum magicum’ (Worm), ‘calf with five feet’ (Cospi) and ‘ova monstrosa’ (Kircher).”

—Wilma George in Impey and MacGregor (2000)

A note to the reader: Hello reader. Before we begin, I wanted to let you know what you are getting into by reading this essay. Do not be afraid, but if you are squeamish about the dead or pathologies, you might reconsider. I am writing this entire essay (yes, essay), not completely as a scholarly piece, but rather as a reflection on my own experience with documents. My original intention was to present this material in a Creative Display at our DOCAM2020 meeting, engaging the audience by inviting them to look at a slideshow of these museum monsters through either a View-Master, a stereopticon, or both, and ask them to comment in a physical book that documents each slide—a sort of analog Instagram. But as the pandemic has forced many of us to do, I had to rethink the purpose and structure of this piece. I decided to branch out and experiment by doing an essay. I hope you enjoy reading it as much as I have enjoyed writing it. —KFL

Collecting Museum Character
As a museologist who travels a lot, I make it my duty to see as many museums as I can, in places far and wide. As I do this, I aim to capture the character of each museum and its exhibition personality through photographs. In my mind, I am collecting these snapshots to aid in teaching my museum studies courses. As it stands, I have thousands of photos, far beyond what I use for class, and in those, a multitude of weird things abound—collections that may be considered monstrous. In general, we seem to name something as a monster when it is not familiar to us, positioning it as something to be feared. This year’s DOCAM theme, Documentary Monstrosities, brought us into dark worlds where monsters surround us, are inside us, and distort our worlds. For me, some monsters are not dark, they are sources of wonder. I do not necessarily equate being monstrous with being scary, terrifying, and/or hurtful. To me, these museum “monsters” are beautiful. I appreciate them and the curiosity they bubble up in me; I welcome the questions they raise and the differences they bring. When I call these things “monsters,” I am grateful for what they stir me to ponder and my consideration of them is always with reverence and respect.

Inspired by the sub-theme of this year’s conference, Celebrating Monsters, I decided to finally start doing something with these sources of my intense fascination. I compiled a photo essay, intended for a View-Master/stereopticon show and commenting station around these documents. In the process, my goal has been to ask myself and others:

• What is it about these monstrous documents that pull me in?
• Why do we want to go to museums to see mis-figured beings, amputation tools, effects of ancient surgery, mythologized and misidentified monsters?
• What makes a particular object a monster?
• How does this differ, or not, from early sideshows?
• Why were such things a source for fascination in the early days of museums?
• What has changed between those early purposes and today’s museum purposes?
• What did the early labels say and how do they compare to today’s interpretations?
• How do we justify the preservation and exhibition of this material beyond shock value?
• With modern medicine and a society based more on rationality, do we still have the ability to collect such things and do they exist?
My Museum Monsters

I have an odd fascination with all things macabre in museums. For some reason, it brings me comfort. I know that seems strange and counterintuitive. If I were to name my favorite kinds of museums—not easily done, as I love all museums—I would choose those having to do with medical history (especially pre-20th century) and those relating to the early cabinets of curiosity. In fact, the very term “cabinet of curiosity” piques something deep and strong within me that never gets old. I could look for hours into the old sketches of Renaissance cabinets such as Wörm’s (pictured here), Settala’s, or Calzolari’s, imagining myself in the mind of a contemporary visitor and the wonder they must have felt observing their surroundings. Part of my fascination with cabinets stems from the fact that I will never be able to feel what it is like to be in one. It is as if I am striving to achieve that which will never be attainable. There are now only replicas of such spaces, like the one I stumbled upon in Rembrandt’s home in Amsterdam (see below). However, none of them can truly emulate what it must have been like to stand in that room, filled to the brim with the owner’s obsessions—beside me, above me, below me, hanging from ceilings, stuffed in drawers, scattered on the floor. Today’s replica cabinets are sparse, with an ironic representation of the representations, rather than the chock-full object spaces they once were. There’s something slightly disappointing when I come upon the pieces that I just know (because they often do not say) were in early cabinets, but are now scattered and separated into nice, neat little delineated pockets of space with tidy labels. Give me the cluttered, overwhelming, and very full places that we see in those tantalizing drawings. Leave me with my curiosity—what is this here in front of me? And this? What could it be for? Why is it here? Where did it come from? Sometimes the juxtaposition of un-like things causes one to see more, to ask more.

In pathology museums and those with mummies or other human remains or representations of humans, I am struck with wonder. Wonder at the human condition, wonder at the incredibly diverse experiences of people across this planet over time. When I see real mummies (in the U.S. this is no longer as possible as it once was, but in other countries they may still be present in exhibitions), I thank them. I stand in front of them and “talk” to them. I ask them who they were, what they felt, who their family was, what did they see in their lifetime? This moment we share makes me feel as if I am acknowledging their personhood, their individual and unique life. My intense and focused consideration of their humanity, as I see it, somehow imbues life back into them. They are not “just documents” there for me to witness. They lived lives, as I do now. They were children and played with their friends; they had mothers and fathers; they may have had their own children. They ate, they slept, they had favorite things, and they had fears. They were—and are—human beings. I want them to know, as crazy as this may sound, I am grateful they are there for me to wonder about.

Strolling Analysis

This essay is part personal exploration, part scholarly study, as I use my own material and experience to seek out the answers to questions that began from personal encounters with monsters in museums.Preparing for the DOCAM meeting, I went through all the photos that I have taken at museums—not systematically, but rather more like a comfortable stroll. I compiled roughly 100 images that I considered to be “monsters” for this conference. I did so
without any kind of criteria—just what spoke to me as monster while strolling through. Several months later, I went through those I had grouped, trying to figure out what inspired me to classify them as representations of monsters for the DOCAM session. Their subject matters seemed all over the place. There was everything from anatomical waxes to preserved pufferfish to artfully decorated bezoars (a stone-like mass taken from the gut of an animal; the bigger the stone the better). I went through the grouping a second and third time, writing them all down, what they were, and why they fascinated me. Out of this final round of strolling analysis, I came up with FOUR categories which I named with affection: Death & Pathology, Freaks & Aliens, Things in Jars & Drawers, and Documents of Documents. Below I provide you a selection of both the photos I took and the list from my full analysis. Some shots are a bit fuzzy and not very professional. When last you were in a museum, you may have noticed that lighting can be a bit low and for good reason. Please pardon these not-so-good shots, but even as they are, they represent that moment when I was there, with the document, interacting and capturing them to bring home with me. At the end of this essay, I provide a complete list of all the museums I refer to in this essay, explicitly or not.

A Tour of Museum Monsters

**Category 1, Death & Pathology:** Vanitas, anatomical waxes, stuffed humans, wax people, reliquaries, fragments of particular individuals’ skin or hair, human skin books, trephined skulls and tools, bones and skeletons, bony results of violence, death masks (especially Roman), mummies, bog people, electric chairs, and pictures I couldn’t take (and maybe wouldn’t take) like human pathology collections preparations, casts, or models.

**Category 2, Freaks & Aliens:** Purposeful monsters (e.g. antelope egg-hatching, a muskrat duck, a jackalope), accidental monsters (e.g. two headed calf, “freak pig”), gold-encrusted bezoars, elongated skulls, leprosy rooms in a leper colony, unicorn horns, shrunken heads, (historically-considered) exotic or unusual humans (e.g. the Boboli dwarf, the so-called double-headed boy of Bengal, and “giants”), coral, mermaids, ostrich eggs, and porcupine fish.
Category 3, Things in Jars & Drawers: (sometimes cross-listed with one of the two above): Jar of moles (the animal), jar of sea mice, a room full of fluid-preserved healthy body parts (e.g. whale penises and lone human hands), preserved examples of diseased body parts (e.g. a hand with smallpox, a tumor), tattooed bits of skin, drawers of things people put up their nose, trays of prosthetic eyeballs, and relics (e.g. Galileo’s finger).
Category 4, Documents of Documents: Paintings of cabinet rooms, paintings by Arcimboldo, labels (especially old handwritten ones), memento mori, trompe l’œil paintings of cabinet furniture, staged cabinet exhibitions, visible storage, artwork of surgeries, Renaissance grottoes, replicas (especially giant & miniature), and vintage photographs of deceased loved ones.

Dynamic Documents
The way these various pieces have been used as documents over the years is part of the mystery I am trying to solve for myself—same object, changing interpretations. Consider the unicorn horn; no cabinet was complete without it. The unicorn horn represented the ultimate fantasy animal in Medieval Europe (although they would not have called it such). Now, we might see these “horns” totally re-contextualized for what they actually are—the tooth (tusk) of the male Narwhal (a whale-like animal that swims in the coldest of waters). In both natural history museums and art museums alike, they are often unabashedly labeled as precisely what they are—a canine tooth of the narwhal. These museums never mention the object’s monsterly past, even though the very reason they are in the collection is likely because it once began in someone’s cabinet. A single “unicorn horn” exists, at once, in both the form of lore and history and as an informational “fact.” For me, the unicorn horns are special. They represent something else for me, the wonder that began with the first museums and the journey they took into modern times. I see their whole story—from the romantic fantasy of a mythical beast to the natural history of an amazingly resilient sea animal. In that single twisted tube of calcium are all these things. The fact that one material object can hold so many narratives captures me. Now, I seek them out; I want to see as many of them as I possibly can. Adding to the mystery, they are so often hidden in museums; not positioned as the thing people might truly want to visit, but rather as part of some other story, such as part of a Renaissance treasury or a decorative symbol in a gilded scepter. It seems that every time I see one, it is off to the side or tucked in some corner, often taking me by surprise. It is as if it is too shy to come forward and share its fascinating story. Below are just a few “unicorn horns” I have met.
I admit that, up to this point, I have made a very big assumption. I have assumed that you too might see these documents as monsters. Perhaps you do not? Perhaps my entire categorization of things like unicorn horns as beautiful monsters surprises you, or you just flat out disagree with me. That, my reader friend, is completely acceptable. The documents I purport here to be monsters or monstrous are entirely my own perception. Ironically, I never thought of them as monsters at all until this conference got me thinking about what it means to be a monster. What might a *museum* monster be? In document studies, we talk a lot about the various ways that documents can be—a singular meaning or all at once—a multitude of things. It is in this complexity—temporal, spatial, phenomenological—that documents insert themselves. It is in our individual, as well as our collective, perceptions of them that gets to the root of why documents and the study of them is so robust and rich with potential.

**Rhinoceros: A Beautiful Monster**

My most recent monster encounter at a document institution came this summer at the Toledo Zoo in Ohio, USA. My daughter and I were looking for ways to get out of the house, feeling cooped up from the long stay-at-home orders. They had released us a while back, although very few activities were available because public places like museums were still closed. But the Zoo was open! Perfect. It was a Sunday and usually that is a very busy day at the zoo, but because it was rainy, fewer braved the weather to come out on this seemingly dreary day. I, myself, love rain and garner an energy from it, so I was eager to go. Because of all these factors, we stopped longer at every exhibit/animal than we normally would. We spent more time with our attention on each one of them. It must have been from an appreciation to be out, to be seeing something other than our house, our yard, and each other. Maybe it made us notice things we had never noticed before because our attention was so focused. We rounded to one “corner” of the zoo, far in the back where we found ourselves in front of the rhinoceros’ home, which I am now reluctant to call an exhibit (you will see why in a moment). Our original aim in visiting this area was to see the naked mole rats, but the building was closed due to pandemic crowd restrictions.
We found ourselves watching the rhinoceros positioned nearby, in her little moat, right under the fence that kept us apart. (I decided she was a lady but have no evidence to back up this theory.) She was so close to us! Or should I say, we were so close to her. You could see the texture of her hard, rough skin, the folds, and the shape of her back. She was about 3/4 immersed in the water, only her top back, butt, tail, and head emerging. Her head was lifted a bit to keep her nostrils above the water, and the surrounding pool was still except for the ripples produced by her breathing. I could see right into her eyes, black and shiny. Something about watching her breathing was mesmerizing. Of course, she was breathing. She was alive, a living thing. Even though she is a document, a representation of this animal from out there in the wild, she is an individual—breathing and enjoying a bit of time alone in the cool water while the rain moistened her remaining exposed surfaces. We spent about 15 minutes just watching her. She didn’t do much, mostly just breathed. Sometimes her nostrils went below the water as she fell in and out of sleep. I thought about all kinds of things during this time: What is she thinking? Does she know where she is? Does she feel sad? Does she feel happy? What made her get in the water? I mean, it’s raining! What does that skin feel like? It looks so hard, yet it has a softness about it. Oh, how I would love to touch it. How can people kill these amazing animals for a single little tusk? She sure looks dinosaur-like; I wonder what the scientists say about that? I thought about Briet’s antelope and how she felt more “human” to me than “document,” whatever that means. And then I got my chance to figure it out. A herd of humans arrived, comprising two or three adults and a mass of children. They pushed their way into our moment, into our space (me, my daughter, and Ms. Rhinoceros) and took over. They yelled at the rhinoceros, or perhaps yelled around her—the equivalent of tapping on the window of a fish tank or an exhibit window at the zoo (please don’t do that). They talked about her as a thing, as if she was there only to entertain them. The whole exchange was frenetic. We left. We could not endure the sheer impoliteness of such disrespectful interaction with the beautiful animal. I again thought about why the rhinoceros was there. She was there as a document, to represent an aberration in nature, or alternatively as a specimen of the natural world, evidence of its grand variation. She was probably also there as part of the effort to save rhinos in general. Many zoos belong to a program called SSP (Species Survival Plan) where the goal is to ensure healthy, genetically diverse Zoo populations. This brings all kinds of thoughts to mind. First, how are zoos perceived by the majority of people—as entertainment? I honestly don’t know, and watching the human behavior that day made me realize this might be the case. Second, if she is a document in the zoo and doubly perhaps now a document that soon will be only in a zoo and not in the wild, how does this change her document status? Or I should say, how does it change Briet’s example of the antelope? If animals are no longer plucked from the wild to represent what is in the wild and now have become the only place in which they live and breed, how are they any longer a document of the one in the wild? Aren’t they now in their habitat? In other words, are zoos now an original habitat for some animals? Third, is this a case where documenting something is seriously going wrong? While I know that zoos make their best efforts to educate their public about what they do, why they do it, and that animals are living beings that deserve respect, I fear that the majority of witnesses to these documents are like this family we encountered—see the animal only as a form of entertainment for them. The other day, a local
zoo was talking about “connecting people to nature” as one of their special features. They spoke as if “this is what we do.” But if zoos are actually a living catalog of sorts, and the animals are representations not in their natural habitats, are they really connecting people to nature? Or are they connecting people to zoos?

Only just now did I look Ms. Rhinoceros up online, months after my visit. The Toledo Zoo website is excellent, loaded with all the good things they are doing, from how they care for the animals through feeding and enrichment to their conservation efforts beyond the museum walls. They post animal care videos (we all love peeks behind the scenes, don’t we?) and show you their sustainability initiatives. There’s even a Bowling for Rhinos event each year! And, as many zoos are doing now, people can “adopt” an animal to help support their care. (I did this for years at our local zoo in Kansas with my coyote, Fang). Oddly, I cannot find any information on my friend, Ms. Rhinoceros. So, for now, she will remain a she. I wish I could find out more about her as an individual. I want to know where she came from, how old she was, why is she at the Toledo zoo, and has she ever seen “the wild”?

Monsters are Human Too
Rounding back to my questions at the outset, I don’t think I have answered them at all. Maybe they are unanswerable. In fact, I may have more questions now than when I began. Even so, this is not a bad thing. In the exploration of questions, we figure things out. They might not be the answers, but they inch us closer to understanding.

Perhaps my interest in these museum monsters is in the humanity behind each. By humanity I do not mean human. I mean actuality, care, and the realization that every individual on this earth lives a life and has unique experiences, and ones that I cannot necessarily share. In my fascination of what another “person” has suffered or encountered, I am taken to a state of wonder. I wonder what it all means. Why were terrible disfiguring diseases so rampant in the past? Why did we believe in unicorns and why don’t we now? Why are 100 moles in a jar the source of reactions of revulsion on one hand and sheer joy in another? Why are paintings of skulls done for very different reasons in the past still of interest today (or they wouldn’t be on exhibit, would they)? Why is a living, breathing beautiful animal not respected as the wonder that it is? Even though I am not answering my original questions, I do feel as if I’ve gotten to some underlying point here. As I said at the outset, I love all museums. But perhaps these particular favorites of mine actually reveal something that may seem quite the opposite of macabre and monstrous. I think these morbid, odd, aberrations of nature do three things: 1) help us to care about others, 2) realize the sheer diversity of experiences that exist, and 3) spark us to be grateful for our own good fortune and elicit compassion for others. If being a monster is about being “the other,” which seems like what we are talking about, then presenting the humanity of others and the diversity of human experience beyond our own could (should) lead to gratitude for our own lives and help us to have compassion for other living things on this earth. It is an opportunity to see monstrosity as an opening for making the world a better place and having more knowledge about others to impact change. In this way, seeing beautiful museum monsters can lead to empathy, consideration, and hopefully, action.

To me, a good museum causes you to leave with more questions than answers. A good museum sparks wonder and curiosity. It causes you to seek, to ask, to explore. A good museum should empower its visitors to make a difference in the world, even in the smallest ways.

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1 All photos of museums are the author’s.
2 There are some modern renditions of cabinet-like exhibits that I find wonderful. The wall of sea animals at the American Museum of Natural History, many of the exhibits at the Boerhaave Museum in Leiden, places like the Barnes Foundation, Brooklyn Museum’s Connecting Cultures exhibit and visible storage exhibits like the Luce Centers for the Study of American Art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and Brooklyn Museum, and The Wonder Room at the Columbus Museum of Art, all inspire me with wonder.

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The Document Institutions Represented in the Photos and Study:

American Museum of Natural History, NY, USA
Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, UK
Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, Sydney
Barnes Foundation, Philadelphia, USA
Boboli Gardens, Florence, Italy
Bodyworlds, Amsterdam, Netherlands
Boerhaave, Leiden, Netherlands
British Museum, London, UK
Brooklyn Museum, NY, USA
Burke Museum, Seattle, Washington USA
Cleveland Museum of Natural History, Ohio, USA
Cleveland Museum of Art, Ohio, USA
Cluny Museum, Paris, France
Columbus Museum of Art, Ohio, USA
Gustavianum, Uppsala, Sweden
Grant Zoology Museum, London, UK
Hunterian, London, UK
Indiana Medical History Museum, Indiana, USA
Kunsthistoriches Museum, Vienna, Austria
La Specola, Florence, Italy
Luce Center for the Study of American Art, Brooklyn Museum, USA
Mauritshuis, The Hague, Netherlands
Metropolitan Museum, NY, USA
Milwaukee Public Museum, Wisconsin, USA
Museo Galileo, Florence, Italy
Museum of History of Science, Oxford, UK
Mütter Museum, Pennsylvania, USA
Narrenturm, Vienna, Austria
National Museum of Ireland, Dublin, Ireland
Ohio History Center, Ohio, USA
Ohio State Reformatory, Ohio, USA
Palazzo Poggi, (Aldrovandi Collection), Bologna, Italy
Phallological Museum, Reykavik, Iceland
Pitt-Rivers Museum, Oxford, UK
Rembrandt House, Amsterdam, Netherlands
Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, Netherlands
Rosenborg Castle, Copenhagen
Schatzkammer (Imperial Treasury), Vienna, Austria
Teyler’s Museum, Haarlem, Netherlands
Toledo Zoo, Ohio USA
Wellcome Museum, London UK
Ye Olde Curiosity Shoppe, Seattle, WA, USA
Bibliographical Sources of Interest:


