

# Museum Critiques:

## The Museum of Jurassic Technology

by James Bradburne, Diane Perlov, and Nina Simon

**Critically Wonderful—  
Wonderfully Critical  
The Museum of  
Jurassic Technology**  
**by James.M. Bradburne**  
**AADipl MCSD**

**H**istorically, cabinets of curiosities have not been popular in America. John Choate, one of the founders of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, wrote in 1880 that the museum's

plan was not to establish a mere cabinet of curiosities which should serve to kill time for the idle, but... to gather together a ...collection of objects illustrative of the history of the arts in all its branches ...which should serve not only for the instruction and entertainment of the people, but should also show the students and artisans of every branch of industry... what the past has accomplished for them to imitate and excel.

Museums were meant to be uplifting, educational and useful, not frivolous.

There are of course exceptions to this widespread disdain for cabinets of curiosity: Joaneath Spicer's brilliant permanent installation of a *Cabinet of Curiosities* at the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore (opened 2005) gives visitors an exceptional opportunity to explore the culture of curiosity and the mindset of the late Renaissance, and the City Museum in St. Louis could not be called anything but a contemporary cabinet of curiosities. In Europe, the collections of important historical cabinets of curiosities have

been carefully preserved, often in their original settings, including the Schloss Ambras in Innsbruck, the Green Vaults in Dresden and of course the famous Habsburg *Kunstkammer* of the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, which is due to re-open in 2012 after a decade-long closure.

One of the extraordinary museums in America is a cabinet of curiosities: David Wilson's Museum of Jurassic Technology in Los Angeles. This museum would win the approval of even the notoriously crusty museum critic Kenneth Hudson (2001) in every respect: it is marked by the personality of its founder, it is a completely coherent whole, and it is ruthlessly intelligent. The Museum of Jurassic Technology experience actually begins with the adventure of finding it. Finding anything in Los Angeles can be a challenge, especially for a foreigner, and the Museum of Jurassic Technology looks from the outside like an abandoned diner. Its address is 9341 Venice Boulevard in Culver City, some four blocks west of Robertson Boulevard in what somebody seems to call the "historic Palms district of Los Angeles," but even locals cannot often reliably give directions to the museum. Once found, however, the experience rewards the effort made to get there.

Even before entering the exhibition itself, the visitor encounters a tiny shop full of wonders, ranging from porcelain thimbles to do-it-yourself music boxes. In addition to extraordinary objects, the shelves are arrayed with publications by authors including actor and magician Ricky Jay (a large selection) and cultural critic Lawrence Weschler. And of course there are the exquisite exhibition catalogs published by the museum itself, including:

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The MJT (the dark facade) is situated on busy Venice Blvd. next to a flooring store. Courtesy of Diane Perlov.

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... in the Museum  
of Jurassic  
Technology the  
improbable is  
probably true,  
and the likely is  
likely to be false—  
and nowhere will  
you ever be told  
which is which.

*On the Foundation of the Museum: The Thums Gardeners and Botanists; Geoffrey Sonnabend: Obliscence, Theories of Forgetting and the Problem of Matter; Bernard Maston, Donald R. Griffith and the Deprong Mori of the Tripsicum Plateau; Garden of Eden on Wheels: Selected Collections from Los Angeles Area Mobile Home and Trailer Parks; and No One May Ever Have the Same Knowledge Again: Letters to Mt. Wilson Observatory, 1915-1935.*

Just past the cash desk to the left in a darkened nook is the introductory audiovisual, which sets out the museum's history and its objectives:

The Museum of Jurassic Technology traces its origins to this period when many of

the important collections of today were beginning to take form. Many exhibits which we today have come to know as part of the Museum were, in fact, formally part of other less well known collections and were subsequently consolidated into the single collection which we have come to know as The Museum of Jurassic Technology and thus configured, received great public acclaim as well as much discussion in scholastic circles. [...] Like a coat of two colors, the Museum serves dual functions. On the one hand the Museum provides the academic community with a specialized repository of relics and artifacts from the Lower Jurassic, with an emphasis on those that demonstrate unusual or curious technological qualities. On the other hand the Museum serves the general public by providing the visitor a hands-on experience of "life in the Jurassic."

A very clear mission statement, and certainly more informative than those of many museums. The visitor then is prepared to encounter the collections themselves. The narrative continues:

The Museum, however, not content to rest on its laurels, kept pace with the changes in sensibility over the years. Except for the periods of the great wars in this century (when twice portions of the collection were nearly lost) the Museum engaged in a program of controlled expansion. Walking through the Museum, the visitor experiences, as it were, a walk back in time. The first exhibits encountered are the contemporary displays and reaching the far end of the Museum, the visitor is surrounded by the earliest exhibits.

## One of the extraordinary museums in America is a cabinet of curiosities: David Wilson's Museum of Jurassic Technology in Los Angeles.

Founded in 1987, the museum has already been the subject of a book by Lawrence Weschler in 1995 entitled *Mr. Wilson's Cabinet of Wonder*, which describes in detail a large number of the museum's permanent exhibitions, so to do so again would be redundant. The museum adds displays continuously, and new installations include an exhibition of the work of the 17th century Jesuit polymath Athanasius Kircher, *The World is Bound with Secret Knots: The Life and Works of Athanasius Kirche; The Lives of Perfect Creatures: The Dogs of the Soviet Space Program*; and a charming Russian tearoom—a scaled down model of a Russian Imperial study.

What makes the Museum of Jurassic Technology exceptional is not only its permanent exhibitions, which are in themselves extraordinary, but its overall argument. The Museum of Jurassic Technology is a critical museum in the post-modern, post-structuralist sense: it calls into question the fundamental assumptions on which most museums are based. The Museum of Jurassic Technology describes itself as a natural history museum, and traces its history to Noah's Ark. As such, it claims the authority of science. The authority of science depends on witnessing. The history of witnessing goes back many centuries, and became of fundamental importance as the claims of a nascent experimental science had to supplant the claims of rival systems such as alchemy, geomancy, and neo-platonic cosmology. Imperfect observation was central to experimental practice, but public corroboration of results was essential for science to triumph over its rivals.

Because of this need to claim public authority

at the expense of rival systems, the *public* emphasis in our culture has remained largely on answers, rather than on questions. This emphasis, however, masks the real nature of scientific investigation. Whereas scientists themselves labor in their laboratories trying to make sense of the messy and puzzling phenomena they study, the public has been presented with a picture of science that advances steadily towards the truth, never making mistakes. Nearly all modern museums had a mission to educate the public, and historically, implicit in the museum's mission is that it presents the truth—that the objects presented and the interpretation they are given represent the latest in scientific and scholarly



Letters to Mount Wilson Observatory. Courtesy of Diane Perlov.

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research. Seen to be neutral and authoritative, the museum insists on the unquestioning trust of its visitors.<sup>1</sup> Neil Postman once proclaimed museums to be sacred spaces—the “temples of our times,” (1993) and debates such as those surrounding the exhibition of the Enola Gay at the Smithsonian in 1995 show the extent to which museums are still expected to be the voices of absolute authority. There is little place for debate, contingency or doubt in the modern museum.

On the one hand, the Museum of Jurassic Technology is a museum connoisseur’s museum. The exhibits are intricate, fascinating, and painstakingly created, and the labels small and densely written, just barely legible, in the best museum tradition. The lighting is dramatic: pools of light in dark spaces proclaim the importance of the artifacts displayed under glass. Its exhibitions recall the dusty and mysterious museums we remember from our childhood and employ all the techniques in the museum professionals’ armory. The dark spaces, dramatic lighting and labeling of the museum all proclaim the museum’s authority and the veracity of its exhibits, which include stink ants, mice on toast, and an Amazonian bat imprisoned in a block of lead. On the other hand there’s a catch: in the Museum of Jurassic Technology the improbable is probably true, and the likely is likely to be false—and nowhere will you ever be told which is which. The Museum of Jurassic Technology is much more than a mere curiosity—it is a ‘critical’ museum. These are no longer modern times, but post-modern ones, and the Museum of Jurassic Technology is its museum.

The value of the Museum of Jurassic Technology is that it carefully separates the ‘what’ of knowing from the ‘how’ of persuading. In a

world of increasing complexity, the importance to distinguish fact from rhetoric is a much needed skill—akin to Neil Postman’s famous reprise of Ernest Hemingway, who when asked if there were one quality needed, above all others, to be a good writer, replied, “Yes, a built-in, shock-proof, crap detector” (1969). It is a museum that fulfills Nelson Goodman’s belief that

the museum has to function as an institution for the prevention of blindness in order to make works work. And making works work is the museum’s major mission. Works work when, by stimulating inquisitive looking, sharpening perception, raising visual intelligence, widening perspectives, and marking off neglected significant kinds, they participate in the organization and reorganization of experience, in the making and re-making of our worlds. (1980)

The Museum of Jurassic Technology reminds us of the importance of our critical skills. It invites us to question, to challenge, to reject the world of truths we are daily presented with by Fox News, ‘reality’ shows, political campaigns, and of course, museums.

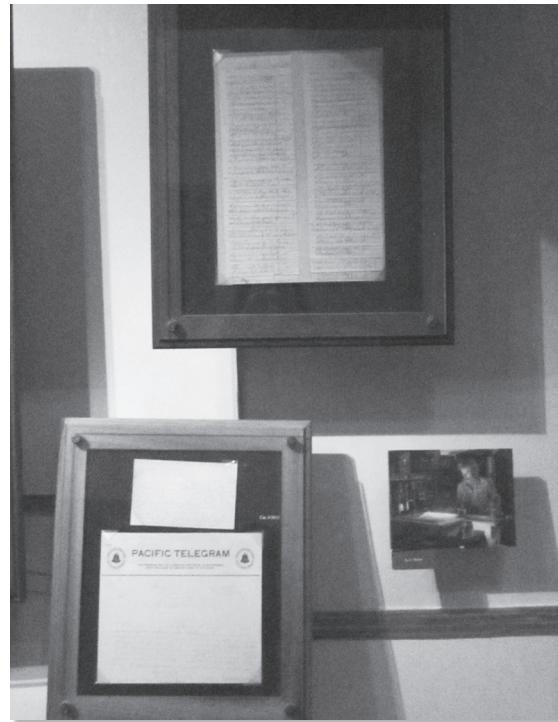
<sup>1</sup>Of course, museums have always served rhetorical ends, and increasingly museums are created to espouse specific political and cultural arguments—which include championing specific identities, proclaiming specific theories and asserting specific values. Starting in the mid-19th century, the museum’s political masters also had a strong interest in defining national interests, and in using the museum’s pre-eminent position as a pulpit from which to proclaim the truths of national identity. The modern museum preached the truths of the grand narratives—Manifest Destiny, the superiority of Western culture, the onward march of Progress, the Triumph of the Will. To visit a great museum was to situate oneself in a fabric of common achievements—and more importantly, common goals.

## The Museum of Jurassic Technology—Appreciating Life in the Lower Jurassic

by Diane C. Perlov, Ph.D.

Shortly after the Museum of Jurassic Technology (MJT) opened in 1989, my husband Dale, our 6-year-old son Noah and I paid our first visit to this extraordinary museum. The MJT is a maze of narrow, winding hallways, with countless alcoves and mini-galleries. It has that intimate, claustrophobic feel of someone's home that has been converted into a museum. The environment is the same throughout, although some galleries are markedly dimmer than others. Visiting the MJT took me back to my childhood memories of losing myself in the dark, musty corridors of the old De Young Museum in San Francisco. The MJT revived all those old senses; the worn carpet and the walls that seemed to close in on you as you explored deeper and deeper into the museum. As I was closely examining a micro sculpture of Pope John Paul II that was no wider than a human hair, created by artist Hagop Sandaljian, Dale slid up beside me. "This place creeps me out," he whispered. From somewhere on the other side of the wall I heard Noah whimper, "Mama, I'm scared." It seems the MJT has this effect on some people.

However, outside of my immediate family, the MJT has a devoted following in Los Angeles and internationally. Its founder David Wilson was awarded a MacArthur Foundation fellowship in 2001. When the



Letters to Mount Wilson Observatory. The top letter is from Edward and begins "To Whom it may concern. This is to certify, That I have found the key To all Existence." Courtesy of Diane Perlov.

MJT was going through economic hardships a few years ago, renowned members of the LA culture scene came to the rescue, as did museum professionals from around and outside the U.S. to save the beleaguered little museum with the big name. In assessing the Museum the question that has nagged me from the beginning is: *How does this unconventional museum with the irregular open hours, and which is sandwiched between storefronts and locked behind a barred door, draw such passionate fans?*

The MJT has been described as an 18th century *wunderkammer* created in the 20th century (1995). Yet the MJT is not a random collection of curiosities. While there is no linear flow or explicit connection between various galleries, two major themes run through its displays:

**Exhibits at the MJT challenge the nature of belief.** Without irony, obscure and bizarre scientific explorations are presented next to micro-artwork such as a Flemish landscape carved into a fruit pit. Presented in a traditional museum format, each display

Exhibits at the MJT challenge the nature of belief.



View of Tell the Bees exhibit and entry to library. Courtesy of Diane Perlov.

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## How as a society do we select and retain certain kinds of knowledge and discard others?

begins with a plausible hook and draws you into a story that as it proceeds becomes less and less tethered to your known world. At a certain point in the storyline you lose your initial belief and question everything you've been told so far. You not only wonder if anything in this museum is true, but you are likely to contemplate what you even mean by truth: *Why do I believe some things over others?*

**There is a vast amount of wondrous knowledge and competing worldviews available and ripe for experiencing, and conventional museums present only a fraction of it.** Displays throughout the museum contain volumes and volumes of complex information—knowledge that would not be found in any conventional science or natural history museum. You pay attention, and appreciate the sheer volume and extraordinary nature of theories and knowledge you were previously unaware of. *How as a society do we select and retain certain kinds of knowledge and discard others? Who makes these decisions?*

While the MJT celebrates the triumphs of scientific exploration, it challenges the orderly world we have created from them. To paraphrase an audio excerpt from the MJT: *A novel phenomenon, something so extraordinary*

*that it cannot be, enables us to escape the narrow limits of our horizons.* Below are two of my favorite exhibits that exemplify this approach particularly well:

### **Letters to Mount Wilson Observatory 1915-1935.**

Displayed in wood frames like 19th century shadow boxes, more than 30 original letters cover the walls of the closet-sized gallery. The letters come from ordinary people from around the world and are written to the scientists who manage the space observatory at Mt. Wilson in Los Angeles. Some letters contain praise and solicitations. But most describe theories, observations, and knowledge that the writers seem desperate to pass on. The cumulative effect of all this is staggering. The viewer is surrounded by voices echoing off each other, voices that we never hear from, a mass of diverse ideas that would otherwise be lost. *What ideas do we choose to save and what do we choose to discard?*

### **Geoffrey Sonnabend's Theories of Forgetting.**

Several dioramas and exhibits weave a narrative tale of the life and work of Geoffrey Sonnabend, an early 20th century neurophysiologist. The story starts with his father's engineering work in Argentina and returns there as the location where Geoffrey had his scientific breakthrough for his work on *obliviscence* (theories of forgetting). The final exhibit explains his complex theories of forgetting which were a departure from conventional memory research. Like other exhibits at the MJT, the story draws you along a twisted path until you scarcely know what to believe. *Where did he lose me? How do I know what and who to believe?* But you hang in there because Sonnabend's proposal—that memories are just an illusion—rings hauntingly true. Plus there is an intimacy to

While the stories and topics draw you in, the environment keeps you off-balance.

the audio track and you listen as if you were hearing from Sonnabend's original lecture. As with the *Letters to Mt. Wilson*, I came away with a palpable feeling of loss, not only for my own elusive memories, but for this relentless scientist and author of an innovative theory of forgetting that was itself largely forgotten. *What is the role of museums and other institutions in preserving certain knowledge and in making those selections for us?*

#### The Trick Is in the Doing of It

As they say, the trick is in the doing of it. One could have the most fascinating objects and thought provoking stories and still not make a compelling museum experience. What makes the MJT successful is the museum collection and display strategies that can apply to any museum.

#### A Good Story Well Told

Each exhibit starts with a hook—an extraordinary find. Most have an audio narrative, where a story is woven by an authoritative and patient narrator. The story includes both academic complexity and revelations about the character's feelings, health and family dramas, as if told by a learned professor who at any time will go off on a fascinating personal tangent. An exotic story about South American bats starts as a story about an anthropologist following up on a rumor about "*a small demon which the local savages believe able to penetrate solid objects.*" *Tell the Bees* starts with *Duck's Breath*—a duck breathing life into an afflicted child's mouth—and proceeds to display every folk remedy and belief our mothers told us and many more. The combination of a hook, engaging script, and authoritative narrator are just some of the elements used by master storytellers.



From the exhibit Garden of Eden on Wheels, this is one of several coffin-shaped cases displaying collections from Los Angeles area mobile home parks. Courtesy of Diane Perlov.

#### Someplace Special to Go

As soon as you enter the MJT you know you are in a strange place, a place richly textured with sights and sounds that could not be replicated by a virtual tour. In addition to the dark, narrow hallways, floral wallpaper, and wainscoting, you instantly smell the musty corridors of knowledge and the rich Georgian tea and cookies being served in the upstairs Tula Tea Room. The MJT is also an emotional experience. While the stories and topics draw you in, the environment keeps you off-balance. You're constantly lost in the maze of hallways and not sure what's around the corner. Many of the galleries are so dark you need time to adjust your eyes to the exhibits dramatically lit within. The mystical Eastern music and voices coming out of corner speakers add to the otherworldly feeling. This *push-you-off-balance* and *pull-you-into-the-stories* extends throughout the museum, leading you on, keeping you on

In sum, I find the MJT good to think with.... Even incomprehensible things can be presented to trigger powerful associations and bring new insights.

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#### References:

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your toes—making it an emotional and place-specific experience.

#### **One Voice, Many Speakers**

The MJT has one voice, albeit many speakers. The voice in every case is one of academic conviction and authenticity, and comes in an earnest whisper directly to your ear. There is no alternate perspective assessing the work or mediating how it should be understood. You feel as if you are hearing directly from the source or the temple priests.

#### **Creating Intimacy in a Crowded Place**

Intimacy is created by the voice as well as the setting. The exhibits have a certain preciousness to them. It is as if you are entering a temple of knowledge and meeting the people who, working against all odds, have painstakingly collected, saved, and displayed these amazing things so that you could learn from them. Rich Victorian floral arrangements and live ferns decorate hallways. Alcoves decorated like altars present objects like rare jewels—on pedestals within cases lined in satin or silk and lit with pinpoint spots. The MJT has an advantage in creating intimate experiences because it is so small. You're lucky if four people can fit around any one display. Yet I have been in many small galleries that fail to use their lack of space to such an advantage.

#### **Owning It**

Exhibits that connect with something we already know empower us. It helps us hardwire and expand our learning. *Tell the Bees* encourages viewers to share their own special knowledge of folk wisdom. *Garden of Eden on Wheels* displays the stuff (china cups, dolls, bottles) collected from LA trailer parks and mobile homes. This is knowledge that many

people have grown up with, that they know and own. Having it elevated to a museum display gives them an opening to expand on this information and share it with others.

#### **Making the Familiar Strange and the Strange Familiar**

Like good artwork, many of the MJT exhibits take something familiar—like a barking coyote—and let you see it in new ways. Conversely, by placing something peculiar (like an incoherent letter to Mount Wilson) in a familiar context, you gain a framework within which you can better understand it.

In sum, I find the MJT good to think with. I sometimes go there when I am in a creative rut or I need to find a solution to a difficult problem. From time to time, I need to be reminded that there is a wondrous breadth of knowledge and a variety of theories in the wide world. Not all theories are good theories and not all information makes sense. But even incomprehensible things can be presented to trigger powerful associations and bring new insights. The fact that the MJT does this so well is a testament not only to the artistry of this unconventional museum, but to its effective use of some traditional museum practices that we can all benefit from not forgetting.

#### **The Secrets I Own that David Wilson Made by Nina Simon**

**T**he first time I visited the Museum of Jurassic Technology, I was sixteen.

My boyfriend Philip had suggested we meet there, and so I drove over the hill, parked, and walked through a strange little door on

a crummy, desolate block of the West Side. Well, not really walked through; I probably spent ten minutes walking around in front of the building, trying to figure out where I was supposed to go and whether the thing was open and what kind of thing it was. This was 1997 and a weekday; at the time, before the MacArthur award, the Lawrence Weschler book, and a string of press, the Museum was even more mysterious than it is now.

I finally bolstered enough confidence to enter, not knowing I'd need a good deal more courage to navigate the galleries and find Philip reading quietly in a library tucked away in a corner. Set against the genial blast of Southern California sunshine, the Museum of Jurassic Technology squats in unassuming dimness. The entry transition is otherworldly, like entering a casino run by the dead.

The Museum of Jurassic Technology includes many masterful presentations. The eerie brilliance of the stereoscopic flowers, floating like ladies in white in a dark lake. Ricky Jay's "failed dice," mocking beauties that tease out doubts about chance and chemistry. The myth of the Deeprong Mori, which is probably the simplest and most captivating object theater I've ever seen.

But for me, the Museum is less about any one exhibit than the feel of the place, which is more powerful than I've experienced in any other museum. The Museum of Jurassic Technology is an art installation. It is funny, strange, and most of all, immersive: the winding halls, the assemblage of funny and gorgeous and oddly dull presentations, the cascade of bells and religious holograms lurking in the back. And these days, with the second floor open, there's

the surprise of the tearoom, where Diana Wilson, wife and museum cofounder with David Wilson, may pour you a cup while her small dog pads around the room. The whole place is a kind of floating castle of oddities, lulling and provoking in equal measure.

I've had the distinct pleasure of introducing many people to the Museum of Jurassic Technology, both from the museum world and outside. It's made me realize how keenly personal the experience is. Some people are disgusted. Some think it's funny. Many use the word "unsettling." Some people love the exhibits I find dull, like the meticulous dioramas of trailer parks or the story of likely-fictitious and certainly obscure memory scientist Geoffrey Sonnebend. Some people want to explain the place, and books like *Mr. Wilson's Cabinet of Wonders* (1995) help them. A warning: if you like your magic mysterious, don't read this book before you visit, and maybe not after.

It's ironic that a museum that engages in almost no advertising is one I ardently proselytize for and promote to others. John Falk's recent research focuses on how museums can succeed when they help visitors express their personal self-concept. Philip and I were artistic, smart kids, and for me at least, the Museum of Jurassic Technology did something many museums aspire to do: it made me feel cool.



*The MJT has a small library (and piano) in the back. Courtesy of Diane Perlov.*

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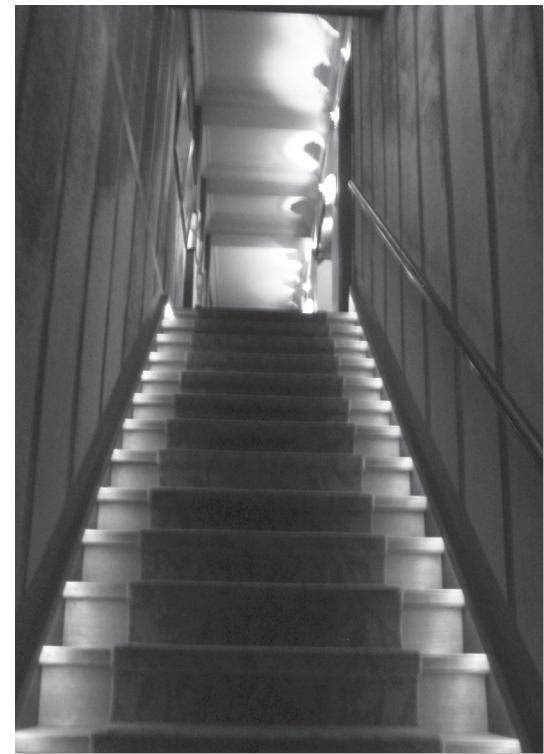
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I had something other people didn't. I would bring friends there, and like Philip did with me, I preferred to hide in the galleries and let them step into their own private worlds of the museum on their own terms. I was proud to show them the secret that had so shocked and energized me. The Museum of Jurassic Technology is probably the only museum in the world where I'm saddened to see crowds of visitors, not because I want to hoard the museum experience, but because the unsettling power of the Museum is diminished if you can see ordinary people like you when you walk in the door.

I often hear curators and educators in art museums say something like, "great art isn't about an easy viewing experience. It shakes you; it unsettles you." But the truth is, with the exception of a few rare single-artist shows or installations, the standard art museum exhibition is not set up to provoke or unsettle. Maybe they want you to learn, but not to feel uneasy or lost or afraid as you do so. The Museum of Jurassic Technology makes me feel all those things, and every time I walk in, it's an opportunity for me to explore how I've learned to embrace and revel in those feelings. I feel ownership over the Museum because my experience there is so wholly mine. And every time I go, I'm reminded of those fears inside of me, that I don't know how to do it, might not get it, might get lost or confused or upset.



The elegant stairway with velveteen walls leading up to the Tula Tea Room. Courtesy of Diane Perlov.

The Museum of Jurassic Technology does "safe danger" better than any science exhibition on risk. And for those who embrace it and learn to love it, the experience becomes a totem of what is possible. I discovered the Museum at a very particular time as a teenager when I was constantly encountering new surprises and assumed there must be many other places like this in the world, secret gardens or cabinets or doors stuck in the middle of the city that lead somewhere else. Fifteen years later, I'm saddened by how few delicious secrets other museums have to offer. I don't want to see a hundred cheap rip-offs of the Museum of Jurassic Technology, made powerless by cheery labels or bright light or the unceasing desire to make things educational. I want to experience and design mysteries, and wonder, and above all, spaces that let visitors breathe in constructed secrets and adopt them for their own. ☀

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