



**BY ELEONORA PIZZINI**

**SUPERVISOR ALEXANDRA MIDAL**

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*Grazie*

*a Alexandra Midal,  
incredibile professoressa e fonte di  
ispirazione durante questi anni,*

*alla mia famiglia, per essermi stata  
sempre vicina, anche a distanza,*

*e a Andrea, che crede con me  
all'incredibile.*



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# *Prologue*

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“Tens of thousands of years ago, when the human mind was young and our numbers were few, we were telling one another stories. And now, tens of thousands of years later, when our species teems across the globe, most of us still hew strongly to myths about the origins of things, and we still thrill to an astonishing multitude of fictions on pages, on stages, and on screens - murder stories, sex stories, war stories, conspiracy stories, true stories and false. We are, as a species, addicted to story. Even when the body goes to sleep, the mind stays up all night, telling itself stories.”

With these few lines, the American writer Jonathan Gottschall<sup>1</sup>, explains as humans are storytelling animal. From the beginning, humans have given shape to stories to understand the ordinary world through the extraordinary world of imagination. Stories have the capacity to shape us, opening our minds to new unexplored ideas and making us believe even the most amazing things. Good design also gives shape to objects, environments, interactions and systems, but above all, design gives shape to ideas able to change

the way we see the world. Design and narrative officially met in the discipline of *Design Fiction*. Julian Bleeker coined this expression in his essay *Design Fiction*<sup>2</sup>: practice that mainly deals with questions on current uses, norms, ethics or values, through creative provocations, innovations, and explorations. The attention to storytelling and design is increasing, and more and more designers are thinking and working on it. Among them I want to report *The MacGuffin*<sup>3</sup> *Library* by Noam Toran<sup>4</sup> in collaboration with Onkar Kular, originally commissioned for the exhibition *Wouldn't it be Nice* at the Somerset House in London in 2008. This work moves away from the traditional design definition and uses the fiction to reveal how objects have an inner narrative force<sup>5</sup>. The narratives become a means to reflect upon history, memory, and storytelling represented with different media, not only with paper and digital, but objects, prototypes, and exhibitions. But Design Fiction entered the museums only in the form of temporary exhibitions, without questioning the role and nature of the museum itself.

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In my thesis, I pass through the museums' doors, questioning on how storytelling and design can meet in museums and how this can redefine the museum experience, giving shape to new ideas. *The Museum of Jurassic Technology* is perhaps the only current experiment that uses storytelling to make questioned and lead the visitors to a new understanding of what they thought to find in a museum. Storytelling is not used with the intention to show and describe objects, but to give shape and becomes part of the objects of the Museum. The Museum's director and curator, David Wilson, is the narrator of the Museum stories, that creates

biological, archaeological and cultural articles. The Museum of Jurassic Technology is not widely known, and there are very few sources that describe the museum in detail, the curator, David Wilson hardly releases statements, leaving the visitors to a free interpretation. The movie *Inhaling the Spore, a journey through the Museum of Jurassic Technology*<sup>6</sup> directed by Leonard Feinstein in 2004, is the only one that was shot inside the museum's premises, letting the possibility to explore the Museum without being in Los Angeles. *The Primi Decem Anni Jubilee Catalogue*<sup>7</sup> of the Museum of Jurassic Technology, published in 2002, collects in a single volume all the stories of the objects in the permanent collection. Finally, *Mr. Wilson's Cabinet of Wonder*<sup>8</sup>, book by Lawrence Weschler, published in 1995, describes in its first part, the writer's visit to the Museum and continue in the second part, with his reflection on the objects stories.

There are no books or articles that explain the reasons why the Museum of Jurassic Technology creates its own objects and stories, and no one questioned how these fictional objects could work inside a museum. To understand how is possible to have fictions in museums, how does it works and what this can lead to, *Museum of fictions* analyzes the Museum of Jurassic Technology and his permanent collection, discovering an original US genealogy of museums of fictions, going to rebuild the complex relationship between wonder, reality and fictions from the first American museums.

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Gottschall, *The Storytelling Animal: How stories make us human* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012), XIII.

<sup>2</sup> Julian Bleecker, *Design Fiction: A short essay on design, science, fact and fiction* (2009).

<sup>3</sup> MacGuffin is a term attributed to the film director Alfred Hitchcock, to indicate a plot device that keep the dynamicity in a story.

<sup>4</sup> Noam Toran is a young designer that lives and works in Rotterdam, teaching at the Sandberg Institute, Amsterdam and at HEAD, Geneva.

<sup>5</sup> Alexandra Midal, "Fiction rule design", *étapes: 218: Design graphique & Culture visuelle*, March-April 2014, 47.

<sup>6</sup> *Inhaling the Spore, a journey through the Museum of Jurassic Technology*, directed by Leonard Feinstein (2004; Microcinema International, 2006), VHS.

<sup>7</sup> David Wilson, *Primi Decem Anni Jubilee Catalogue* (Los Angeles: The Society for the Diffusion of Useful Information, 2002).

<sup>8</sup> Lawrence Weschler, *Il gabinetto delle meraviglie di Mr. Wilson* (Milan: Adelphi, 1999).





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**THE MUSEUM OF  
JURASSIC TECHNOLOGY**

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# *The Museum of Jurassic Technology*

The Museum of Jurassic Technology is an exceptional museum located in Los Angeles, California, and was founded by David Wilson and his wife Diana in 1988. Until today, they both run the Museum.

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The Museum collection is composed by biological, archaeological and cultural articles, in multiple shapes of objects, video and sound installations. Despite the early years when the Museum was not particularly known and profitable, in the last few years, it has attracted over 23.000 visitors a year from around the world. The Museum is placed along Venice Boulevard in Los Angeles, at the ninety-third block, between a Yoga center and the Center for Land Use Interpretation. It first took up its residence in a 450 square meters' space, but today, it encompasses the entire building. From outside you can see a white fountain on the left and a little green door on the right, with two dioramas<sup>9</sup> at its sides. One with a white urn overflowed by moths, the other, not less enigmatic, presents three glass tubes with titanium, iron and aluminum oxide, according to the labels. The first impression swing between a natural history

*On the opposite  
page the facade  
of the Museum  
of Jurassic  
Technology.*

museum and a place never seen before.

The Wilsons consider their private museum as “an educational institution dedicated to the advancement of knowledge and the public appreciation of the Lower Jurassic.”<sup>10</sup> But the term *Lower Jurassic* is left undefined and unexplained, as most of the things related to this museum. This uncertainty, however, is not applied to the fact that this is, without any doubt, a museum. At first glance to the Museum collection and its particularities, some academics might disagree on that definition, and prefer to call it a private collection. Although the Museum of Jurassic Technology contains all the characteristics of a permanent institution as a museum: open to the public, that catalog, preserve, order and exhibit artifacts, with an educational and studies purpose. Moreover, in the lineage of the American tradition of dime museums, the Museum of Jurassic Technology does not stray, and indeed it fits perfectly as a prosecutor of this tradition<sup>11</sup>.

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The main character of the Museum is certainly the curator and founder David Wilson. Before being a curator, he studied filmmaking at the California Institute of the Arts. During these years of education, he shots several short experimental movies, supporting himself as a specialized cinematographer for the film industry, but soon he realized to be more interested in creating a relationship with a broader and diversified audience<sup>12</sup>. The genesis of the Museum is revealed by his wife Diana, who remember one day in 1984 when her husband handed her a piece of paper written Museum of Jurassic Technology. She remembered to have smiled and asked him: “What is that? The work of your life?” and she recalls that David just smiled back<sup>13</sup>.

*David Wilson*

In the same year, the Museum of Jurassic Technology becomes part of Wilsons reality. David Wilson received in 2001 the *MacArthur Foundation Fellowship* for his work in the Museum that “underline the fragility of our beliefs and highlight the remarkable potential of the human imagination.”<sup>14</sup> The Museum was created with the purpose of lead the visitors to redefine their understanding of everything they thought to find in a museum. The Museum collection presents different articles, demanding the visitors to reflect on their perception of what is real and what is not.

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<sup>9</sup> The diorama is a scaled-down setting that recreate scenes of various genres.

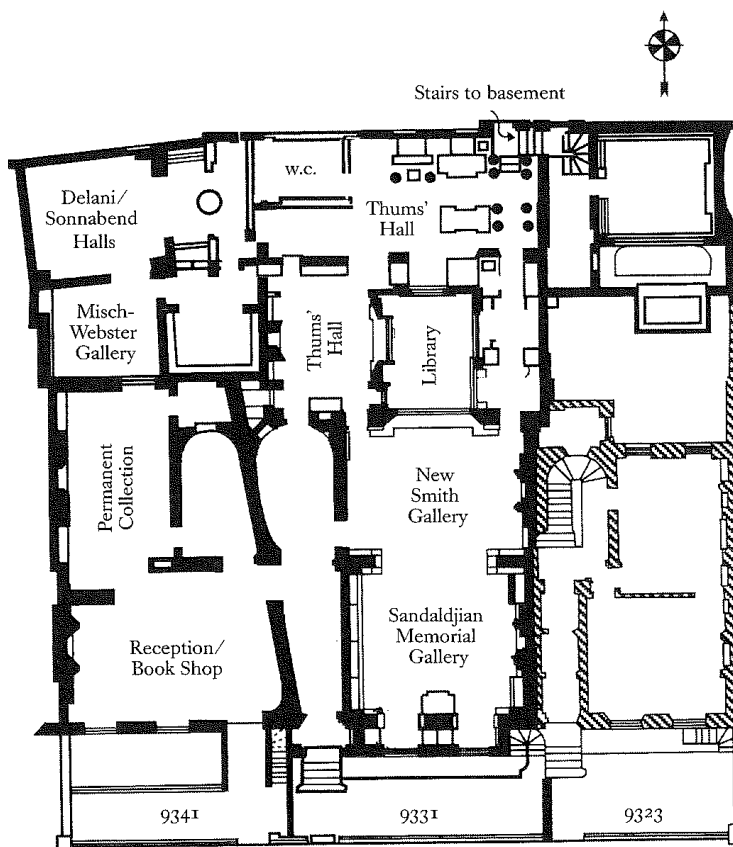
<sup>10</sup> David Wilson, *Primi Decem Anni Jubilee Catalogue* (Los Angeles: The Society for the Diffusion of Useful Information, 2002), 13.

<sup>11</sup> For further details, see the chapter *The origins of the Museum of Jurassic Technology*.

<sup>12</sup> Lawrence Weschler, *Il gabinetto delle meraviglie di Mr. Wilson* (Milan: Adelphi, 1999), 56.

<sup>13</sup> Weschler, *Il gabinetto delle meraviglie di Mr. Wilson*, 59.

<sup>14</sup> Matt Blitz, “Inside Los Angeles’s Strangest Museum”, *Smithsonian Magazine*, March 31<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/travel/inside-las-strangest-museum-180954803/?no-ist>, accessed on August 2017.



*Above the plan of the ground floor of the Museum of Jurassic Technology, in occasion of the Musuem Jubilee.*

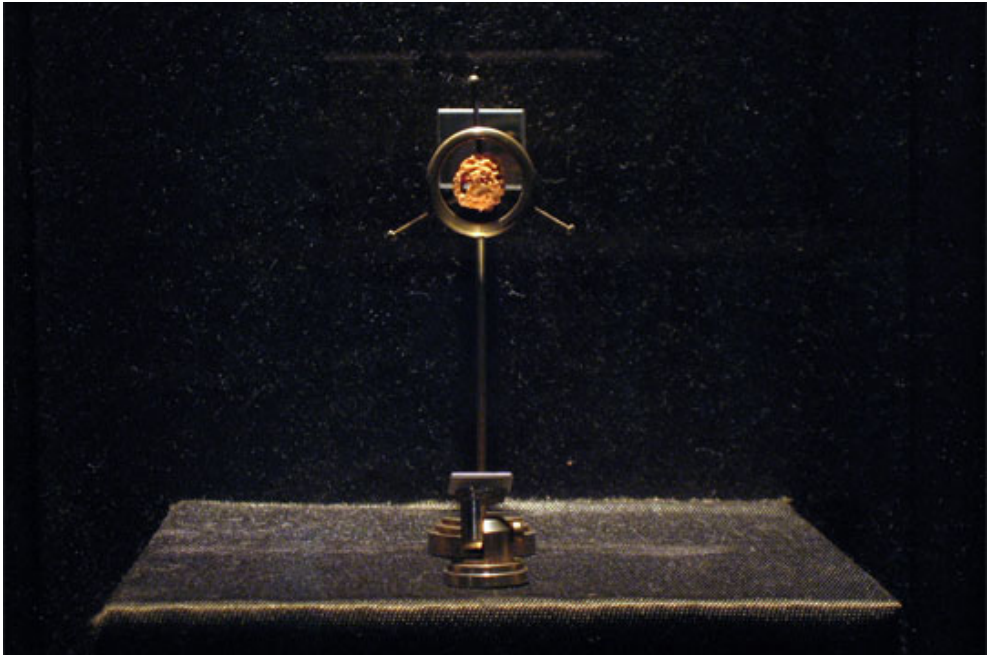
# *Inside the Museum of Jurassic Technology*

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The Museum of Jurassic Technology is a dark and labyrinthine place, divided into many rooms on two floors, and, at the top, an open terrace. Oak tables and glass vitrines guide the visitor inside the museum, acoustic guides and labels promise to explain every content. In the past, the Museum existed just in the form of “loans from the collection” granted to galleries and museums in America. When it took office in its current building, the museum began to exhibit those that were private collections. Today, in addition to a large permanent collection, it features several temporary exhibitions each year.

## *Collection*

Wondering around small and dark spaces, visitors can discover many different curiosities, some of them seem to come directly from a natural history museum’s collection, but others look like they are very singular, as they are coming from someone’s imagination. In the maze of rooms, it is possible to admire some biological curiosities as the skeleton of the European Mole, some complex and accurate scientific instruments and a pair of yellow-brown gloves apparently belonged both to the left hands of some historical figure. But if the visitors decide



*Above the Horn of Mary Davis of  
Saughall, below the Fruit-Stone Carved.*

*Horn of Mary  
Davis of  
Saughall*

to go further and start to look better, they will come across a wall full of horns, nothing unusual, excepting for the small central one: a human horn. The *horn of Mary Davis of Saughall* from the 17<sup>th</sup> century: "Blackish in color, not very thick or hard, but well proportioned. Length 153 mm."<sup>15</sup> As the caption explains.

*Fruit Stone  
Carved*

Inside a simple glass case, hanging on the wall at the height of the eyes, the visitor can observe, on top of a thin metallic pedestal, perfectly lit, a *Fruit-Stone Carved*. Big almost as much as a ten-cent coin, it looks finely carved. On the opposite side, it is positioned a small mirror that allows to observe the engravings on the back of the core.<sup>16</sup> The caption recites: "Almond stone(?); the front is carved with a Flemish landscape in which is seated a bearded man wearing a biretta, a long tunic of classical character, and thick-soled shoes; he is seated with a viol held between his knees while he tunes one of the strings. In the distance are representations of animals, including a lion, a bear, an elephant ridden by a monkey, a boar, a dog, a donkey, a stag, a camel, a horse, a bull, a bird, a goat a lynx, and a group of rabbits: the latter under a branch on which sit an owl, another bird and a squirrel. On the back is shown an unusually grim Crucifixion, with a soldier on horseback, Longinus piercing Christ's side with a lance, the cross is surmounted by a titulus inscribed INRI. Imbricated ground. Dimensions: Length 13 mm Width 11 mm."<sup>17</sup> The absurd and abundant description can lead to looking at the core one more time, and reflect on how such a small object can really contain all of that. The objects of the Museum collection start to reveal their precarious balance between real and imaginary.



*Above some showcases inside the Museum,  
below the Display for the Deprong Mori.*

*Stink Ant of the  
Cameroon*

But continuing our journey inside the museum, visitors may now decide to pick up what looks like a phone receiver, which is there, only to tell the story of the *Stink Ant of the Cameroon*. The story starts in the rainforest of the Cameroon in West Central Africa where lives an ant from the genre *Megaloponera Foetens*, also known as the Stink Ant. This ant has its habitat at the ground level, and it is one of the very few insects to produce a cry audible to the human ear. It can happen that, while it is looking for food, the Stink Ant is infected by inhaling a spore from a fungus of the genus *Tomentella*. After being inhaled, the spore makes its way to the brain of the animal, changing its behavior. For the first time in its life, the ant leaves the ground and begins to climb. Once it reaches an established height, the Stink Ant bites the plant with its mandibles and waits to die. The fungus meanwhile continues to grow, and after two weeks, a spike appears from what was the head of the ant. The speaker continues: this prominence is around an inch and a half in length and has a bright orange top full of spores, ready to rain down and infect other unsuspecting ants.<sup>18</sup> It is possible to admire the animal in its glass showcase, as it buries the jaws in the stem of a plastic fern, but probably any visitors are already wondering if all this have a little piece of scientific fundament.

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*Deprong Mori*

Just around the corner, instead we find a chair in front of an elaborate display. Another telephone receiver is ready to tell you everything about the bat called *Deprong Mori*. The lights have already started to turn on and off, guiding you along the narration, framing, in the end, on a portion of the lead cage that locks inside an exemplary of this incredible animal.<sup>19</sup> Here the fiction is at its highest point. The Deprong Mori or *Piercing Devil*, in

fact, is capable, as the locals believe, to penetrate solid objects. It was reported for the first time, by Bernard Maston in 1872, in his work travel at the Circum-Caribbean region of Northern South America. About eighty years later, in 1952, Donald Griffith of the Rockefeller University found Maston's papers and decided to continue studying this animal. According to his scientific researches, the Deprong Mori had evolved a highly-specialized variation of the standard echolocation capability of bats. For over eight months Griffith tried ceaselessly to capture an exemplary without any success when eventually, he designed a specific trap for this animal. Walls of lead, eight inches thick, two hundred feet in length and twenty feet high, arranged in the forest, like spokes of an unbelievable gigantic wheel. Finally, in the early morning of August 18<sup>th</sup> at 4:13 am, Griffith's instruments recorded an impact. The x-ray viewer found, at a depth of seven inches, the first Deprong Mori ever contained by man, eternally frozen in the block of lead in front of you. Can you see it?

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As you certainly have understood, all these objects are extraordinary and make the Museum of Jurassic Technology an extraordinary place. Each of these artifacts, tell us different stories but all combine fiction and reality with the use of an excellent storytelling. This is not the usual use of storytelling<sup>20</sup> in museums. The use of storytelling has entered long ago museums, with the aim of promoting and facilitating a new way of learning and create involvement in the visitor experience, using elements such as light, space, arrangement, and communication. In the Museum of Jurassic Technology, instead, storytelling is used to create stories that become founding parts of the objects exhibited. What really distinguishes the Museum of

Jurassic Technology is the importance given to each element to forge a continuous storytelling for the whole museum.

But the Museum of Jurassic Technology is not an isolated case, investigating in the history of museums, it is possible to find antecedents, museums that used storytelling to create and display unexpected curiosities. Through these museums, it is possible to outline what can become a new historical line that connects the Museum of Jurassic Technology with some of the first American museums of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

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<sup>15</sup> Wilson, *Primi Decem Anni Jubilee Catalogue*, 23.

<sup>16</sup> Weschler, *Il gabinetto delle meraviglie di Mr. Wilson*, 62-63.

<sup>17</sup> Wilson, *Primi Decem Anni Jubilee Catalogue*, 28.

<sup>18</sup> Weschler, *Il gabinetto delle meraviglie di Mr. Wilson*, 13-14.

<sup>19</sup> Weschler, *Il gabinetto delle meraviglie di Mr. Wilson*, 18-19.

<sup>20</sup> Storytelling is used here with the meaning of the act of creating and narrating stories, a social and cultural activity who uses the principles of rhetoric and narratology.



# *Origins of the Museum of Jurassic Technology*

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When I started researching the origins of the Museum of Jurassic Technology, I came across the *Wunderkammer*,<sup>21</sup> a European phenomenon of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. This initial direction came from the fact that it was usual to find in these collections, extraordinary curiosities, but going more in-depth, I encountered several contradictions between this two realities.

## *Wunderkammer*

Firstly, the aim with which these collections are born is entirely different. The owners of the Wunderkammer collections, in fact, in agreement with the attitude of the 16<sup>th</sup> century Enlightenment<sup>22</sup> society, were aiming to take over all the human knowledge and achieve the myth of encyclopedia. The objects collected attend to arouse wonder and amazement and showed the owners' social status. Most of these collections were composed by faked artifacts or by objects, but they were created from the imaginary world of stories and myths, representing existing stories of popular knowledge, without the use of storytelling for the creation of original stories.

The Museum of Jurassic Technology instead, before everything else, is born with an educational aim, as

it invites the visitor to question the role of museums and what they should exhibit. Moreover, all the objects displayed have an incredible story, that does not come from external sources, as history or mythology, but from the use of storytelling in the creation of unique and original stories, born inside and for the Museum of Jurassic Technology. Accordingly to all of this, the direct association between the Museum of Jurassic Technology and the Wunderkammer has too many inconsistencies, as well as an unmentioned huge time gap.

It is more likable that the Museum of Jurassic Technology comes directly from another lineage of museums that create their own stories and consciously use storytelling in the objects exposed, museums like the *dime museums* and the most extraordinary museum of those times: the *Barnum American Museum*.

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The *Museums of fictions* come directly from the American museum's history, from the early 1780's, after the Revolutionary War (1775-1783), when the United States was not a wealthy nation. Rural migration and European immigration created cities full of different nationalities, religions, and classes, which were looking for a respectable form of affordable entertainment. American theaters had a reputation for promoting prostitution, liquor consumption and rude behavior and so they were not considered a decorous form of amusement. Therefore, the earliest museums in the United States became the sole choice when it came to finding a safe place for decency and entertainment.

*Museum of  
fictions*

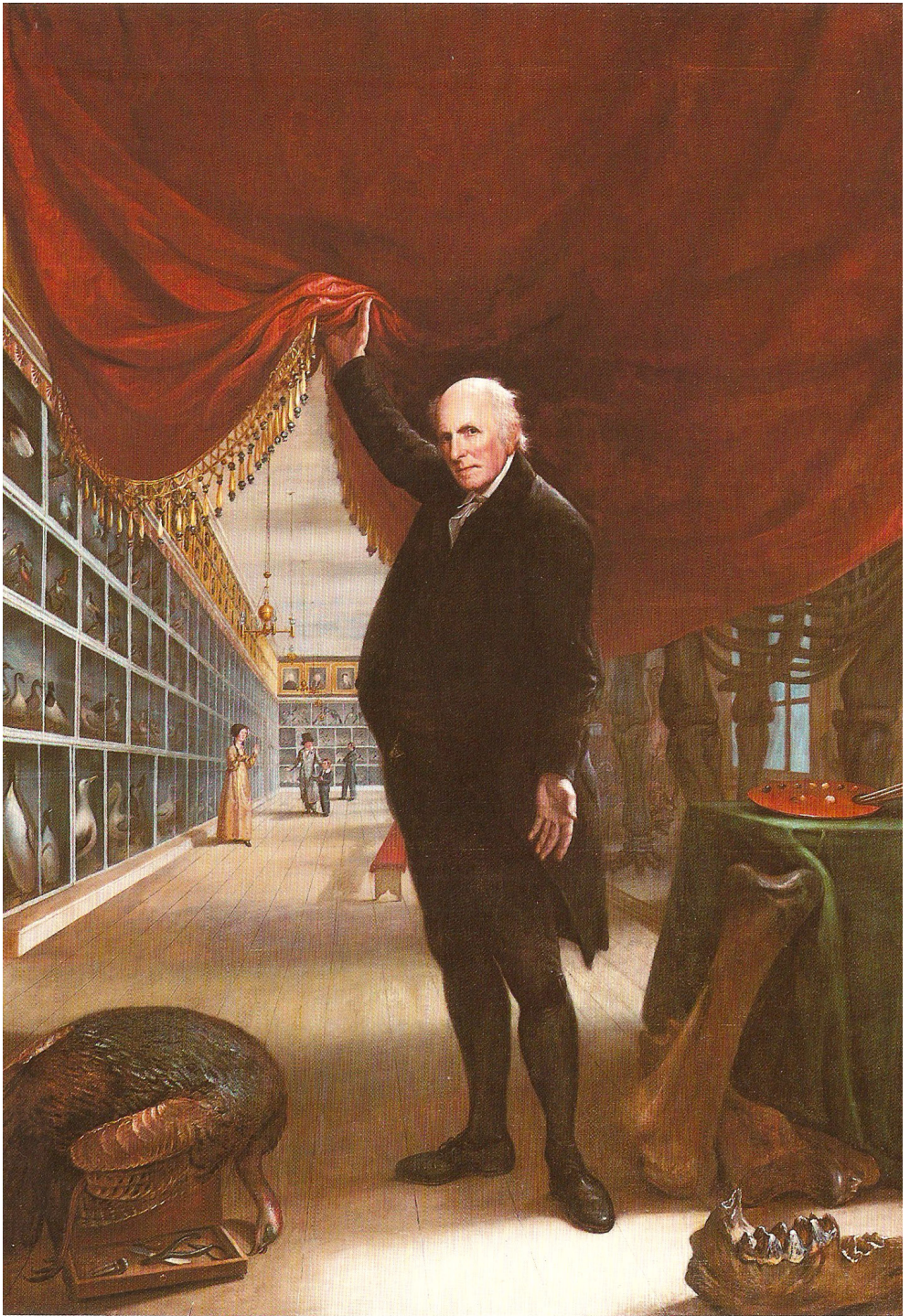
The earliest museums in America were managed by private citizens and were open to the broad public, public that was, with its entry ticket,

the only financial support for them. Museums were following the Enlightenment European tendency, and they were mostly centers of scientific studies,<sup>23</sup> but such a drive for scientific education did not fulfill the desire for public's entertainment. Consequently, to provide a more stable economic support, museums began to satisfy this demand of leisure activity and decided to add in their collections, alongside scientific articles, artifacts that were, for several reasons, unique and extraordinary.

Objects, relics but also animals with extra legs or heads, freak people and theatrical performances, all these brought to the visitors, new and engaging stories, able to be understood by everyone from the moment they were in front of them, in front of their incredibility.

*The Peale's  
Museum*

The *Philadelphia American Museum* was one of the first American museum open to the public, founded in 1786, in the city of Baltimore, by the painter Charles Willson Peale (1741-1827), and known today to be the first public natural history museum in the United States. Also identified with the name of Peale's Museum, it was born to be a scientific institution. The museum collection included paintings, stuffed animal, authentic scientific displays, experiments and presented lectures to a large audience. It was the founder's intention has a museum open to all classes, illiterate and academic, adults as well as children, and both men and women. The Peale family managed and contributed to support the museum, and despite numerous requests for funds, it was never endorsed by the state.



However, to financially support the Peale's Museum during its sixty years of opening, his founder started to follow a less scientific trend and to incorporate elements of popular entertainment. To promote his museum and to obtain new articles to display, Peale starts to ask for donations. The reply was substantial, and the museum received all sorts of odd objects. Between 1790 and 1792 the museum showed artifacts as "a chicken with four legs and four wings, an 80-pound turnip, the trigger-finger of a convicted murderer, and a tiny piece of wood from the Coronation chair in Westminster Abbey".<sup>24</sup>

Even if the exhibition of curiosities was, in fact, just a financial move for the museum to receive incomes and support, we can consider the Peale's Museum as a significant antecedent to these museums that use storytelling for the creation of their own objects. The Peale's Museum was actually the first museum in America's history, that, starting as a scientific museum, adapted itself to this new trend, becoming a place where science and oddities coexisted.

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### *Dime museums*

Starting from 1783 onwards, in all the United States, a new genre of museums began to arise. This new generation of museums was born with the only purpose of providing a democratic and respectable "educational" form of entertainment. These museums were called *dime museum* because of the small price of a ten-cent coin required for the entrance. They represent a unique institution which never expanded beyond the American borders.

*C. W. Peale in  
his museum, in a  
1822 painting.*

American dime museums were of all sizes and types, from entire buildings that contained immense and magnificent theaters, to small deposit converted

into exhibition rooms displaying few curiosities. Usually, dime museums were named from their founder, and they were commercial enterprises managed by private citizens that had the unique objective to attract customers and make money. Only a small portion of dime museum's collections was permanent, many exhibitions rotated between the institutions so that the owners could change show weekly encouraging the patrons.

Inside the dime museums, you would see dioramas, cosmoramas<sup>25</sup>, paintings, relics, stuffed animals, wax figures and live performances such as musicians, hypnotists, and freaks altogether. Many of the items on display were oddities: found and modified to fit known stories, but also invented and created by the dime museum's owners to tell new stories. Besides all of them, the audience could also discover some scientific and historic objects, but they were often distorted or faked to please and fool the audience. The historical wax tableaux,<sup>26</sup> for examples, suffered from "historical amnesia" and deliberately avoided issues of racism, sexism and class struggle.<sup>27</sup> The dime museums were playing with the fiction, as long as the audience was charmed by the shows and the stories that went along.

The most famous and astonishing dime museum was the *Barnum American Museum*. His founder and director Phineas Taylor Barnum (1810-1891) is the legendary American showman and entrepreneur, also known as the self-proclaimed "prince of humbugs" for his exaggerations and fictions inside his museum. The life of Barnum was outstanding, at the age of nineteen he had already several businesses: a store, a real estate speculation,

*Barnum  
American  
Museum*

*The Barnum  
American  
Museum, in 1854.*



a weekly paper and a lottery network. In 1835, he began his life as a showman and a storyteller, acquiring and exhibiting a slave woman, *Joice Heth*, claimed by Barnum for being George Washington's nurse, and to be over 160 years old. This was just the begging. In 1841, he obtained the *Scudder's American Museum*, a famous dime museum placed in a spectacular building in the center of Broadway, New York, to give shape to his own museum.

The 1<sup>st</sup> January 1842, Barnum open the Barnum American Museum: a five-story building divided in seven grand "saloons" as the Seven Wonders of the World. Two years later, the entrepreneur claimed to possess thirty thousand exhibits, and in 1849, he bought the collection of the Peale's Museum.<sup>28</sup> At its highest point, the museum was open fifteen hours and had 15.000 visitors per day. The eclectic collection presented dioramas, panoramas, the trunk of a tree under which Jesus' disciples would have sat, an oyster bar, glass blowers, Siamese twins, giants, albinos, centenarians, Native Americans performing traditional songs and dances, magicians and ventriloquists, among many others. Its numerous attractions make it a combination between a zoo, a lecture hall, a theater and a freak show, and, at the same time, the central site for the development of American popular culture.

One of the most famous objects exhibited in the Barnum American Museum was the *Feejee Mermaid*. In 1842, Moses Kimball<sup>29</sup> brought it to Barnum, that immediately saw in it a story and a source of incomes. Barnum started to set up the narration sending pseudonymous letters to New York newspapers, mentioning that there was a beautiful mermaid, supposedly caught near the Fiji Islands in the South Pacific, and now in possession

*Feejee Mermaid*



*Above the Feejee Mermaid and on the  
next page Barnum and the General Tom  
Thumb.*

of Dr. J. Griffin. That was just the beginning of his narrative plan to arouse interest and expectation, knowing that the audience would be attracted from the exceptional creature, narrated since from the earliest myths. When finally, on August 8<sup>th</sup>, 1842 the public could see the mermaid, they found themselves in front of a combination of a head and a torso of a monkey sewn to a fishtail, mouth open and its teeth bared. The mermaid was not what they expected, but it was too late, too many people had been already amazed by Barnum's story. From this exemplary, several replicas and variations have been made and exhibited under similar names and story, generating a real obsession for this fiction.

Less known but not less incredible is the life and the story of *General Tom Thumb*. Born under the name of Charles Stratton, he met Barnum in 1842, at the age of four, when he was no bigger than a doll. The child stopped his physical growth at seven months, remaining a dwarf for the rest of his life. The showman instantly recognized the extraordinary possibilities that the boy represented, transform him into General Tom Thumb, naming him after the English folklore character. Barnum taught him how to sing, dance, mime, and impersonate famous people, giving shape to the main fictional character of his museum.

*General Tom  
Thumb*

In the Barnum American Museum, storytelling is an essential part of the museum as much as the objects shown. Thanks to the narrative, Barnum could give shape to always new and exciting objects, he could transform any artifact or person into something extraordinary, and he was able, as the high-skilled promoter and narrator that he was, to write articles, letters and books to support his stories and amazed the audience.



AN ILLUSTRATED CATALOGUE

AND

# GUIDE BOOK

TO



## BARNUM'S AMERICAN MUSEUM.

Being an illustrated review of the principal objects of interest in this extensive establishment, and useful to the visitor for purposes of reference, entertainment and instruction

*On the opposite page the cover of the 1860  
Illustrated Catalogue and Guid book of  
the Barnum American Museum.*

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<sup>21</sup>Known also as *Chambers of Curiosities* or *Chambres des Merveilles*, indicates a unique environment in which, from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, private collectors used to keep their collections of extraordinary items.

<sup>22</sup> Intellectual, philosophical, social and political movement developed in Europe. The term enlightenment is used to indicate a form of thought that wants to “enlighten” the mind of men, obscured by ignorance and superstition, using the criticism of the reason and the contribution of science.

<sup>23</sup> Andrea Stulman Dennett, *Weird and Wonderful: The Dime Museum in America* (New York and London: NYU Press, 1997), chapter one.

<sup>24</sup> Dennett, *Weird and Wonderful: The Dime Museum in America*, chapter one.

<sup>25</sup> The name of a device that allowed you to see, magnified and with embossed effects, panoramic images of different parts of the world:

<sup>26</sup> Arrangement of wax figures represented a historical moment or important characters.

<sup>27</sup> Dennett, *Weird and Wonderful: The Dime Museum in America*, chapter one.

<sup>28</sup> In 1860 Barnum published a 112-page illustrated guide book for his museum, promoting his 850.000 curiosities.

<sup>29</sup> Moses Kimball (1809-1895) was a showman and a close collaborator of Barnum.



# *Museum of fictions*

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The Museum of Jurassic Technology is not an isolated case in the museum history, but it is part of an American genealogy that starts shyly with the Peale's museum in 1786, and that last for over hundred years with the institutions of dime museums. Reaching a peak of notoriety with the Barnum American Museum, to get until our days with the Museum of Jurassic Technology. All these museums use the discipline of storytelling to create fictions in a way that was never explored, and to indicate them I coined the expression *Museum of Fictions*.

But even if the Barnum American Museum and the Museum of Jurassic Technology shared the use of storytelling to create stories in their respective museums, they used this technique in two distinctive ways.

In the Barnum America Museum, the objects themselves were extraordinary,<sup>30</sup> with their physical presence in the museum they were telling you various fictions. There was no need for any explanations because you were seeing them. In fact, when Barnum decided to show the Feejee Mermaid,

after all, it was physically present in his museum, maybe it was not what the audience expected, but the mermaid was there, we could have seen it.

In the Museum of Jurassic Technology, the objects exhibited instead are very ordinary, and by themselves, they don't tell you any incredible story. They become extraordinary when the fictional stories become part of the objects. When, for example, an exceptional animal like the bat *Deprong Mori* is presented in the Museum of Jurassic Technology, visitors don't see the bat physically, but only the trap in which it is locked, a neutral lead block. If Barnum had the chance to "capture" this rare animal, he would have shown it to the public while flying through one wall and another.

In the Museum of Jurassic Technology, or you don't see anything, like in the case of the lead cage of the *Deprong Mori*, having to rely on your imagination, or you see something very common, like the Stink Ant of the Cameroon. It is thanks to the fictions that Wilson creates that the reality changed and became extraordinary.

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Different techniques and undoubtedly different purposes for these two museums, but for this first part, we can conclude by saying that yes, it is possible to have fictions inside museums. There is still to be explored how and by what instruments storytelling works in museums.

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<sup>30</sup> The term extraordinary is used to indicate uncommon objects.





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# A PLACE FOR STORYTELLING

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# *A place for storytelling*

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To understand how storytelling works in museums, I decided to continue investigating the case of the Museum of Jurassic Technology. As concluded in the previous part the objects of the Museum of Jurassic Technology are quite common, it is only thanks to the fictions that Wilson creates, that the reality changed and the objects became extraordinary.

So first, it is important to point out the relevance of David Wilson in the museum, not only as curator but also as narrator.<sup>31</sup>

The stories created by Wilson are addressed to a specific audience: visitors to the museum: ready to read, listen and share all the fictions. If we stop for a moment on the public, we can say that today's visitors are not the same ones who populated the Barnum American Museum. More than hundred years have passed, and the society has, undoubtedly, changed. Not only the level of literacy has increased, but also thanks to the technological progress, everyone can have in their pocket a complete encyclopedia. However, despite this leap in time, it is possible to affirm, as Gottschall says

and as I have pointed out at the very beginning of this thesis, that the narration is part of our life, since from the earliest times. Stories have been told and heard in every culture in every time, as an intent of entertainment and search of meaning.

For Wilson, telling these fictions in his Museum of Jurassic Technology is a way to lead the visitor to think about the role of the museum, on which objects could be found in a museum, and this thesis is just one of the examples for which he perfectly succeeds in this.

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<sup>31</sup> No sources unfortunately explain who is behind the narration of the objects, so I am freely assuming that is David Wilson himself that gives shapes to the fictions, as he was also behind the creation of the museum's name.

# *Believe the unbelievable*

The definition of Museum of fictions is based on the use of storytelling in the creation of fictional stories. Therefore, I went to investigate the basics techniques that storytelling, as a discipline, applies in the creation of stories.

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## *A guide into storytelling*

One of the most accurate guides troughs the discipline of storytelling is the volume of 1949 *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers* by Christopher Vogler, published in Italian as *Il viaggio dell'eroe*,<sup>32</sup> in 2010. Vogler is an American screenwriter and story analyst, he has worked for Disney, Warner Bros and 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox and currently teaches at UCLA, the University of California Los Angeles. His conclusions were influenced by the studies of Joseph Campbell's myths explained in his 1973 book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, which it refers to the theories on the archetypes<sup>33</sup> by the Swiss philosopher Carl Jung. The Hero's Journey explores and analyses the structure of stories, recognizing a model and a set of principles that control the narrative. And in contradiction of those who can argue that there are no rules for creating stories, he affirms that even not following any model and relying completely on

creativity is a principle.<sup>34</sup> The hero of the journey is a metaphor used to describe the main character, which changes throughout the narration to reach a new awareness. It sounds like the journey that the visitor undertakes inside the dark and labyrinthine rooms of the Museum of Jurassic Technology.

The first and indispensable component in every story is the *Suspension of disbelief*. This term has been defined as “a willingness to suspend one’s critical faculties and believe the unbelievable.”<sup>35</sup> In other words, it represents the moment when, entering in a story, in an extraordinary word, the consumer decides to make a deal with the narrator, an act of faith in what will be told, and start to believe. The expression Suspension of disbelief was used for the first time in 1817 by Samuel Taylor Coleridge referring to the creation and the reading of poetry, but the expression has expanded, and today it is also used to indicate the necessary condition for the success of a magic trick, a circus show, a TV series or a movie.

In this state of suspension, the visitors don’t investigate the truth of what they are perceiving, even when they start to think about it rationally, knowing that what they are seeing is pure fiction. They all accept what is told to them, as long as the stories take place in the right context and that they are not incoherent with each other.<sup>36</sup>

Once visitors have decided to suspend their disbelief, the journey, as defined by Vogler, within the Museum of Jurassic Technology can begin. The journey is universal and highly varied, but immutable in its basic structure.<sup>37</sup> The hero, or better the visitor, leave the tranquility of his ordinary world, to venture into an unknown world. It can be a real or an inner journey, but the entrance

*Suspension of  
disbelief*

*The threshold*

into the extraordinary world is always through a threshold.

The threshold is the second fundamental element which makes the Museum of Jurassic Technology a place for storytelling. Crossing the threshold is a highly symbolic act, it indicates a change, a decision to leave behind the old and the ordinary and accepting the new and the extraordinary. When every visitor passes through the entrance door of the Museum, they agree to enter an unknown world, a world that is created by the narrator. Once inside, they immediately begin to explore the extraordinary world of the Lower Jurassic, and they will start to deal with the rules of the place. The conclusion can't be unhappy, once explored the extraordinary world, they will return home with a conquered treasure and a new awareness.

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<sup>32</sup> Translatable in English as *The Hero's Journey*.

<sup>33</sup> The archetypes of Jung, in the field of analytic psychology, are recurrent figures in each person's dreams, such as the wise old man, the shadow, the tower, water, and many more. These archetypes have been compared by Campbell with myths and religions, oral culture and popular folklore, finding that they all share the same narrative structure.

<sup>34</sup> Christopher Vogler, *Il Viaggio dell'eroe*, (Rome: Dino Audino Editore, 2012), 8.

<sup>35</sup> "Suspension of disbelief", *Wikipedia.org*, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Suspension\\_of\\_disbelief](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Suspension_of_disbelief), accessed on August 2017.

<sup>36</sup> Allow me to digress on current events, saying that perhaps, unfortunately, is no longer so. We live in a society that, although it can quickly get information and sources, it believed to most of the things that are said. This situation is defined by the term *post-truth*: in a discussion related to a fact or a news piece, the truth is regarded as a matter of secondary importance. This expression was first used in the 1992 essay by the playwright Steve Tesich. In reference to a fake news, presented as authentic, the post-truth would be able to influence a part of the public, becoming thus a real topic, with an apparent logical sense.

<sup>37</sup> Christopher Vogler, *Il Viaggio dell'eroe*, 22.



# *The formula for the Lower Jurassic*

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“When we encounter some truly novel phenomenon, one that reinvents the margins of our world, [the ordinary world] an old hankering is awakened. At such moments, we are like explorers of an unknown dimension: everything seems fresh to our eyes, each idea seems unprecedented, virgin, strange. [the extraordinary world] In the face of this newly created universe, we may be tempted to exclaim - It can not be! - the refusal of the call to the adventure, “yet our protests soon lie buried under an avalanche of wonder.”<sup>38</sup>

## *The mentor*

With these words, Hagop Sandaldjian<sup>39</sup> makes his appearance in a projected slideshow at the entrance to the Museum of Jurassic Technology. The correspondence between the basics elements of storytelling and his words is incredibly perfect. In few words, Sandaldjian has already described how our journey will be inside the Museum. We just met our *mentor*. In addition to the hero, protagonist of the journey, the mentor is the second basic figure in all the stories. He is metaphorically our guide within the Museum. But we are already inside the museum, and we just have to find out what are the rules of this extraordinary world.

The rules of the Museum of Jurassic Technology are the ones that Wilson uses in his narration, to give shape to the objects exhibited. For the extraordinary world of the Lower Jurassic, the curator uses three main components, in different quantities, but with a recurrent structure, as if it was a formula: reality, fiction, and truth.

For all the stories that are told in the Museum of Jurassic Technology, there is always a main character in front of the eyes: an object, an animal, a photograph or even just letters. The reality of the artifacts is obvious, the visitors can see them, almost touch them in their showcase, and that is why we are all led to believe in them. These are the witnesses of the stories and gives the visitors a materialistic and realistic validation of them. It is not about imagining the appearance of a human horn, here it is, in front of them. Long 13.5 inches, uniform in its shape and black in color. The caption is not lying, the component of reality is needed to have something to watch.

### *Reality*

Fiction and truth are combined instead in the artifacts: some are invented but seem true, others are true but seem invented, and it is not always clear which is which.<sup>40</sup> They must be plausible but not necessarily believable. In different proportions and different formulae, the Lower Jurassic objects are not that incredible.<sup>41</sup> One more detail, an invented name, or a modified quote and the story can begin.

### *Fiction and truth*

The characters, i.e., the objects, who populate the extraordinary world within the Museum of Jurassic Technology, are foremost coherent with the world of a museum of natural history. Wilson follows his narrative and does not propose to his visitors, anything we would not expect to see, but objects

### *The context*

that are in line with what they are artifacts from the Lower Jurassic.

Trying to get an accurate answer from Wilson about what it is for him and what the Lower Jurassic means, is almost impossible. When solicited, he usually has an unclear response ready to use: for him, it does not refer to any precise historical period. And in fact, again he is not lying to us, with a quick research it is possible to find that this expression does not refer to the classification of any historical period.<sup>42</sup> This classification works as his stories: reality, fiction, and truth have already begun to combine.

But to better understand how the rules of this extraordinary world work, I analyzed three artifacts from the Museum's permanent collection that were already presented in the first part of this thesis. Starting from what seemed to be unreal and instead uncover itself to be real, to arrive at what seemed plausible to us, but which is pure fiction.

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### *Fruit-Stone Carved*

The *Fruit-Stone Carved*, in the glass vitrine, tells a story that seems to be incredible at first sight, but that instead uses a significant amount of reality as its base for the fiction. The actual kernel, the one described in the absurd caption, with Flemish landscape and animals on one side, and the representation of the crucifixion of Christ on the other side, really exists and it is sited in Oxford. The fruit stone was part of the 16<sup>th</sup> century *Tradescant collection*, which was donated in 1691 to the Oxford University as the nucleus of the newly founded *Ashmolean Museum*.

The size is the same, the caption is identical, but what we find at the Museum of Jurassic Technology is just a common core. The incredibility of the



*Above the real Fruit-Stone Carved from  
the Tradescant Collectio, front and back.*

description turns out to be true, and the core so genuine in front of the visitor's eyes appears to be a fake.

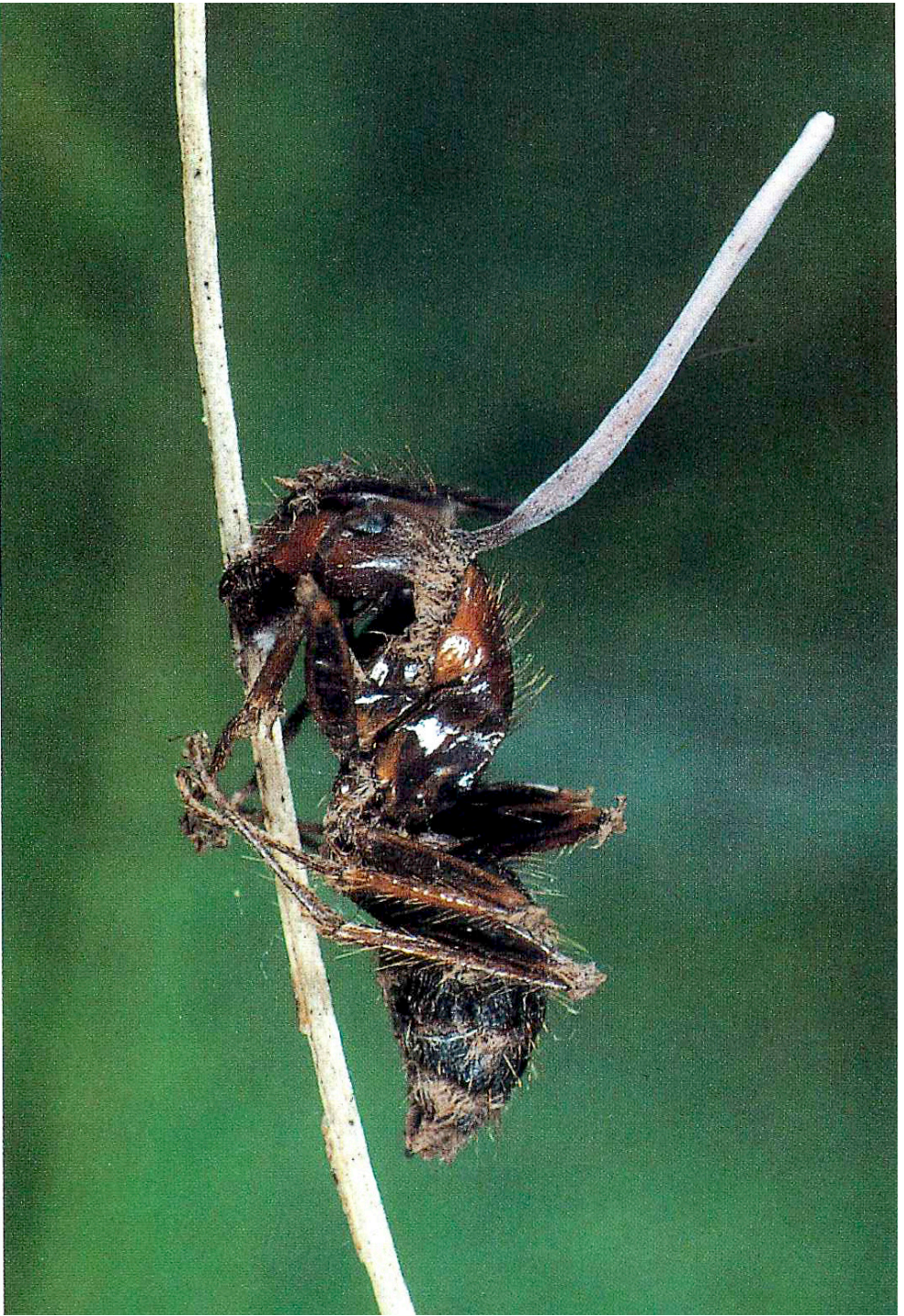
*Ant of the  
Cameroon*

To build the narration of the *Ant of the Cameroon*, Wilson has remained very close to the scientific reality, simply mixing different anecdotes, and creating something that seems to be implausible. With the name of *Pachycondyla Analis* it is described an ant that emits an audible noise, such as a weak chirping, and under the genre *Megaloponera*, with which the animal is classified in the caption, does not go too far from the real *Megaponera* genre. But the scientific nomenclatures can bring just confusion, the most exciting part of Wilson's story is when the insect inhales the spore. Also in this story, Wilson did not go too far from reality: in Florida lives an ant, *Camponotus floridanus*, who inhale or somehow assumes a spore of a fungus. The spore changes its behavior, and the ant finds itself stuck to the stem of some tall plant, the jaw closed on the stem, waiting to die. But it does not end here, from what once was the head of the ant, a pink stem stretches out, it is the fungus, ready to disperse its spores and infect unaware ants.<sup>43</sup>

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*Deprong Mori*

For the fiction of *Deprong Mori*, the bat that had developed his echolocation system becoming able to pass through solid surfaces, Wilson takes up what could be the hypotheses and absurd stories of researchers and scientists, who had to find answers to all those phenomena that had not yet been explained. The story is mainly fictional, just the name of the researcher Griffith has been altered by the real Donald R. Griffin, professor of zoology at several American universities. For the complexity of quotes, scientific details, and



historical sources, the visitor loses itself in the story and is “buried under an avalanche of wonder.”<sup>44</sup>

All the stories in the Museum of Jurassic Technology have in common that they are told with one clear voice. In the discipline of storytelling, the voice is defined as the sound of a story. Often voice and style are confused, but there is a significant difference between them: for style is meant the technical choices made by the narrator, when instead the voice is the result of these decisions.<sup>45</sup> This voice speaks to us through videos, audio guides, captions, and books, as the institutional voice that can be found in all museums and for that it gives credibility to Wilson’ stories.

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<sup>38</sup>Edward Rothstein, “Where Outlandish Meets Landish”, *The New York Times*, January 9, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/10/arts/design/museum-of-jurassic-technology-shows-its-wild-side-review.html>, accessed on August 2017

<sup>39</sup> Hagop Sandaldjian (1931) is a micro miniature’s sculptor. His work is exhibited in the Museum of Jurassic Technology in the collection under the name The Eye of the Needle.

<sup>40</sup>Edward Rothstein, “Where Outlandish Meets Landish”, *The New York Times*, January 9th, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/10/arts/design/museum-of-jurassic-technology-shows-its-wild-side-review.html>, accessed on August 2017.

<sup>41</sup> With the meaning of not credible.

<sup>42</sup> Weschler, *Il gabinetto delle meraviglie di Mr. Wilson*, 35.

<sup>43</sup> Weschler, *Il gabinetto delle meraviglie di Mr. Wilson*, 73-75.

<sup>44</sup> Refers to the quote of Hangop Sandaldjian at the begging of the subchapter.

<sup>45</sup> Gotham Writers’ Workshop, *Lezioni di scrittura creativa*, (Rome: Dino Audino Editore, 2010), 34.





# Epilogue

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*Museum of fictions* aims to answer the question if it is possible for fictions to find a place in the institution of museums. The first part ended by affirming that yes, it is possible to have fictions in museums, there are historical cases that prove it. The Museum of Jurassic Technology is the example of today, and it is not an isolated case. Indeed, it is part of what has been defined as a new kind of American genealogy of museums, the Museum of fictions, that use storytelling to create fictional stories, collecting articles that amaze us and making us believe the unbelievable.

This lineage is traced back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century in America, with the dime museums and the legendary entrepreneur P.T. Barnum and his American Museum. By comparing the Barnum American Museum and the Museum of Jurassic Technology, it emerges a different use of storytelling by the two narrators and founders, P.T. Barnum and David Wilson, probably due to temporal distance. In the American Museum, the artifacts themselves were extraordinary, just think of the complexity and the mythology behind the Feejee Mermaid. Barnum as narrator did not need any further stories

or explanations because the extraordinariness of the object was in front of the visitor. In fact, the artifacts displayed, just by themselves, were referring to stories of myths or folklore, or were authentic objects, or people, out of the ordinary. Barnum used storytelling to enhance the public interest in his objects, and he did it through newspapers articles and advertising, it was, as well as a narrator, a highly skilled promoter.

In the Museum of Jurassic Technology instead, the objects are quite common and taken alone, hardly will amaze the visitor. The objects of the Lower Jurassic become extraordinary when are associated with the stories that, David Wilson, curator and narrator, creates.

The second part is focused on the Museum of Jurassic Technology, and answer to the question of how these fictions are created and for which purpose. The answer lies in the definition of the Museums of fictions: with the use of storytelling. The Museum of Jurassic Technology uses some of the essential elements of storytelling discipline for its narratives to make the objects of its collection, possible and credible. Among the techniques used in the Museum, fundamental is the Suspension of Disbelief. This expression represents the moment when, entering in any stories, in any extraordinary words, the consumer decides to make an act of faith in what they will be told, and start to believe.

Reality, fiction, and truth blend in the artifacts of the Lower Jurassic, to create stories that amaze us and make us reflect on new possibilities. The use of storytelling inside these museums leads us to consider the museum as a place where it is possible to shape fictions, capable of generating reflections, opening to new projects, not anymore

as temporary exhibitions, but as permanent experiment.

I am aware of the exceptionality that these museums represent and the inimitability of the Museum of Jurassic Technology, but I believed meaningful to highlight these new typologies of museums where storytelling is used to create stories and where the fiction seems to fit successfully. The Museums of fictions are a novelty that maybe will be the precursor of a new movement in which other museums of fictions will exist. Because we are in the era of stories, because we are storytelling animals.







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