Thoughts on a Museum of Wonder

by Linda Tesner

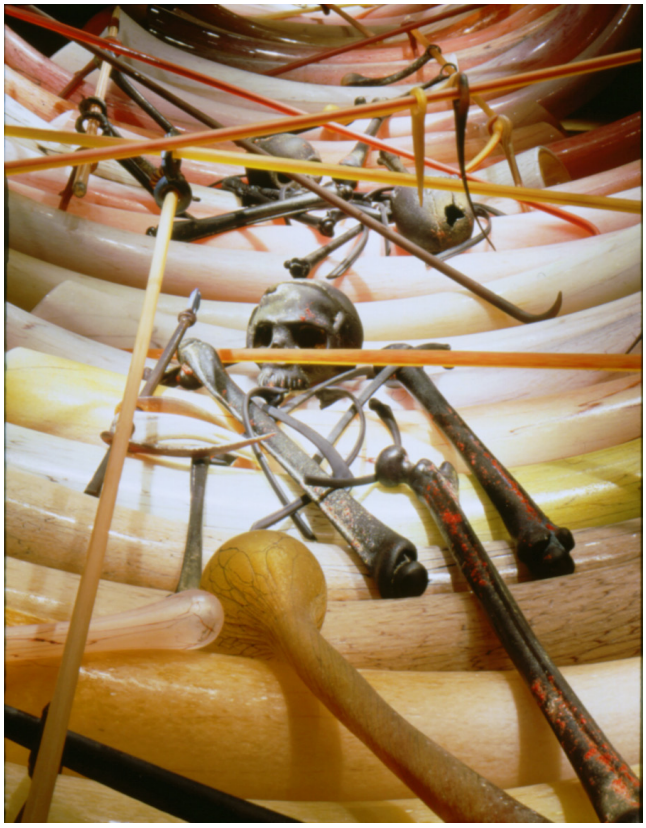
Alexis Rockman (American, b. 1962), Evolution*, 1992, oil on wood, 96 x 288 in., George R. Stroemple Collection, Lake Oswego, Oregon*

For the past thirty-six years, I have worked in museums and art exhibition spaces large and small. In my salad days, I had the great fortune to work at the Maryhill Museum of Art, a poured concrete mansion perched high on a cliff overlooking the Columbia River on the Washington side, about one hundred miles east of Portland. I know of no other art museum like it; its utter uniqueness—its history and collection—has entranced me since the day I first arrived there. Among its treasures, and rather surprisingly given its remote location, Maryhill has an extraordinary body of work by Auguste Rodin, acquired by museum founder Sam Hill (1857-1931) through Rodin's friend, the early modern dancer Loïe Fuller. Most of the Maryhill objects are plaster casts and studies; many are notated with Rodin's personal inscriptions. To view these works in a museum directly across the River from the wheat fields of Oregon is a singular experience.

In the 1980s, Maryhill had not yet met accepted standards for climate control. The Rodin collection was housed on the third floor where, on hot summer days, museum staff would open the windows and doors in the hope that the Gorge winds would ameliorate the stifling conditions. On such days, as you felt the relief of a slight breeze inside the gallery, you could find yourself looking at a cast of *The Thinker,* with a majestic view of Mount Hood to the west, seen through the ornamental architectural grates. On summer evenings when the museum hosted concerts, you could take in this extraordinary view with the sun setting behind the mountain. That breathtaking tableau, the small Rodin plaster (prominently inscribed "à Loïe"), with the magnificent Oregon vista, ignited a recognition in me about what a visual art encounter could be. More than three decades later, I can still tap into that nascent stirring, and, ever since, I have pondered what a curator might do to enhance the visitor's experience of looking at art.

The primary aim of modern-day museums has been two-fold: to collect and maintain art, artifacts, or natural history specimens, and to educate the public. It is likely that every Oregon museum invokes those two objectives in its mission statement. I do not disavow their importance, yet I believe that another kind of goal is equally important—maybe even *more* important during these troubled times. I would like to think that there could exist a Museum of Wonder, where one consequence of art-viewing was pure joy. I know this sounds fanciful, perhaps more than a little naïve. What a concept! Do I mean that we need more exhibitions of French Impressionism, because that's what transports an imagined "average" visitor, or fewer exhibitions of difficult or challenging artwork? On the contrary, I am not the least bit in favor of dumbing down the experience of viewing art. So how would I define a Museum of Wonder?

There is plenty of visual wonder in the state of Oregon. For the purpose of this meditation, I shall not include the wealth of natural phenomena—for example, the Darlingtonia State Natural Site, a stand of carnivorous cobra lily plants near Florence, is a shrine to this botanical marvel. Nor shall I include well-worth-visiting attractions such as the annual Oregon Division Chainsaw Carving Championship in Reedsport, or even the Petersen Rock Garden near Bend, the creation of self-taught Danish immigrant artist Rasmus Petersen (d. 1952). [1] I am thinking instead about visual art displays curated for museums or academic galleries. Sometimes I imagine an exhibition of just three objects, or even fewer, but the rule of my game is that it must be logistically possible to assemble the works in the same room. (Hence, no *Bust of Nefertiti* alongside the *Mona Lisa* and Warhol's *Jackie O*). The Portland Art Museum has taken this idea to an even more focused extreme with its Masterworks series, showing a single painting by Raphael, for example, or by El Greco or Francis Bacon, or installing only one contemporary work, Vanessa Renwick's treatise on climate change, *Next Level Fucked Up* (2016), in the Apex Gallery. These are programs that deserve our attention.

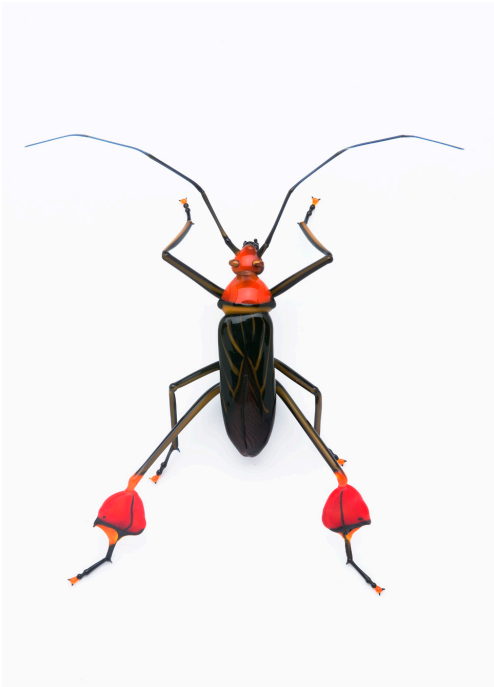


William Morris (American, b. 1957), Cache *(detail), 1993, glass, metal, wood, 5 x 6 x 36 ft., George R. Stroemple Collection, Lake Oswego, Ore.*

One of my favorite versions of this exercise involves a small selection of artworks from the George R. Stroemple Collection: William Morris's thirty-six-foot installation of glass elephant tusks and archeological artifacts called *Cache* (1993); Alexis Rockman's momumentalmonumental magnum opus, *Evolution* (1992), a swampy prehistoric scene painted in an old-master style; and a group of remarkable to-scale glass insects (2005-7) made by the Venetian lamp worker Vittorio Costantini. [2] An interesting addition to this theoretical exhibition would be a spectacular fossil on loan from the Thomas Condon Paleontology Center at the John Day Fossil Beds National Monument in Eastern Oregon. There are too many through-lines in this fantasy notion to explore here, but these objects, seen in proximity, could incite visual delight, not to mention all kinds of rich discussion: art in imitation of natural history, the issue of anthropogenic impact on our environment, and even the tired art-versus-craft argument (I would say that this combination argues against this differentiation). The home for all the artworks in my exhibition is Portland, but only the Rockman has been shown publically publicly in our state. [3]

This brings me to suggest how private collections might fit in with my ideas for a Museum of Wonder. There is an interesting model for a museum that does not collect objects but draws instead upon private collections for its exhibitions. It is La Maison Rouge in Paris, a private foundation mainly dedicated to bringing private collections into public view. A recent example is the exhibition *Théâtre du Monde* (2013-14) which assembled all sorts of heterogeneous objects from the collection of David Walsh, founder of the Museum of Old and New Art in Tasmania. Included were Egyptian canopic jars, taxidermy bird specimens, Pacific bark cloths, European modern art, and many other visual delights. In a radical departure from the typical museum experience, visitors to *Théâtre du Monde* encountered no didactic wall labels nor gallery guide. [4]

The idea of mining private collections to bring wonder to the visual art experience returns us to the very origin of the modern museum, which evolved from the *Wunderkammern* of Renaissance Europe. During the Victorian era, when travelers abroad came home with rare and wonderful *objets d'art*, natural history specimens, and archaeological fragments, their souvenir collections became personal museums full of object memories of their journeys. These collections were often bequeathed to the rapidly growing museums of the day. An example is the exquisite Asian art collection amassed by Gertrude Bass Warner (1863–1951) whose bequest created what is now the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art at the University of Oregon. (My own childhood encounter with the extraordinary netsuke collection there is another personal instance of wonder.) As tends to happen, these collections were then gradually teased apart, their objects classified, stored, and exhibited according to the museum's own proprietary taxonomy. Formal classifications became paramount while personal narratives were lost. Objects became connected on a museological systems level as like was associated with like, but the personality and passion of the collector disappeared—and sometimes, I fear, the viewer's ability to tap into the resonance between the object and his or her own life. (That kind of resonance, by the way, underpins the Portland Art Museum's *Object Stories* project, which since 2010 has collected and posted in the museum and online viewers' accounts of how particular works of art or personal possessions are charged for them with memory and meaning.)



Vittorio Costantini (Italian, b. 1944), Anisocelis Flavolineata *(Flag-footed Bug), 2006, soda-lime glass, 4 in., George R. Stroemple Collection, Lake Oswego, Ore. (Photo: Robert M. Reynolds)*

I propose some version of La Maison Rouge in Porland, where objects held privately might be brought to the delight of the viewing public. Of course many logistical arguments could be made against such a project, especially in our current economic climate. I am not alone in being deeply troubled about the sustainability of our region's small museums and exhibition spaces. The closure of the Museum of Contemporary Craft in Portland in early 2016 was and remains a major blow to the arts ecology of Oregon. The MoCC's permanent collection of about twelve hundred objects represents an irreplaceable narrative of the evolution of ceramic art in the Pacific Northwest over eight decades. If MoCC could not survive, with its rich history and devoted grassroots support, it may seem audacious to propose another brick-and-mortar museum.

Or is it? What if it were a private museum unencumbered by the demands of a permanent collection and even the circumscription of discipline (art, science, natural history, etc.)? What if its mission statement read simply: "Inspire wonder." The effect could be transformative in all kinds of unexpected ways. An admirer of Ezra Pound's verse once wrote to the poet, "I see, you wish to give people new eyes, not to make them see some new particular thing." [5] The expansive effect of art described by that anonymous reader captures my talisman memory of Rodin's *Thinker* against Mt. Hood and of innumerable art viewing experiences since then. The contemporary art world, abetted by fashionable curators, frequently trades on the dual contrivances of cynicism and irony. My wish for Oregon's visual arts community involves instead thinking creatively about how private collectors might interface with the public to share object stories and object memories in a meaningful way. And I wholeheartedly advocate a return to the Museum of Wonder, where the experience of awe and personal delight is reason enough to look at art.

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1. Petersen Rock Garden is now sadly closed, and here I advocate for the preservation of this historic site. The Paradise Garden Foundation at Howard Finster's celebrated four-acre folk-art environment in Summerville, Georgia is a funding model worth investigating.

2. These works can be seen at www.stroemplecollection.com. In his lecture at Lewis & Clark College on 25 October 2016, independent New York-based curator Joseph R. Wolin suggested an even more concise exhibition pairing Luc Tuymans' portrait of Condoleezza Rice, *The Secretary of State* (2005, Museum of Modern Art, New York), and Marlene Dumas's portrait of Osama bin Laden, *The Pilgrim* (2006, Collection of Blake Byrne, Los Angeles).

3. *Evolution* was shown at the Portland Art Museum in 1994, in the exhibition *Alexis Rockman: Second Nature.* Many Portlanders may remember that for a time after the Stroemple Collection acquired this major painting, Evolution hung at the Saucebox Restaurant and Bar on Southwest Broadway.

4. The idea for *Théâtre du Monde* evolved from the exhibition *Artempo: Where Time Becomes Art,* organized by a curatorial team led by the former director of the Centre Georges Pompidou, Jean-Hubert Martin, for the 2007 Venice Biennale. Shown in the Palazzo Fortuny, Artempo evoked a "laboratory of ideas" through an assemblage of art and artifacts related to the idea of time. *Artempo*, I would contend, was an exhibition of wonder.

5. Ezra Pound, *A Memoir of Gaudier-Brzeska* (New York: New Directions Books, 1970), 85.

Linda Tesner is director and curator of the Ronna and Eric Hoffman Gallery of Contemporary Art at Lewis & Clark College in Portland, a post she has held since 1998. She was formerly assistant director of the Portland Art Museum and director of the Maryhill Museum of Art in Goldendale, Washington. She has consulted with arts organizations in the Northwest as well as in New York. She is a prolific writer, having authored numerous exhibition catalogues, monographs, and critical reviews over the past 30 years, including recent monographs on artists John Buck, Joey Kirkpatrick and Flora C. Mace, and David Kroll. Frequently sought as a lecturer and panel moderator on contemporary art, she also serves on the Public Art Advisory Committee of the Regional Arts and Culture Council and has chaired the TriMet Art Committee, overseeing the selection of public artwork for one of its light rail lines since 2005. Tesner received her BA in art history from the University of Oregon and her MA, also in art history, from Ohio State University.

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