

Academic paper excerpt

Museum review assignment

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Review: International Cryptozoology Museum

A recent addition to Portland's Art District, the International Cryptozoology Museum opened in its current permanent location just after Halloween of 2009, a fitting date to be associated with given the fantastic, often macabre, nature of the subject matter. Cryptozoology is a new science based on an ancient fascination with mysterious creatures, "cryptids" being the technical term.

"Cryptozoology" was coined by the Belgian-French scientist Bernard Heuvelmans in the 1940's. According to Heuvelmans, the science¹ is concerned with the search for evidence of hidden animals which "are by definition very incompletely known. To gain more credence, they have to be documented as carefully and exhaustively as possible by a search through the most diverse fields of knowledge."²

There is perhaps an urge in every human being to believe the unbelievable. Cryptozoologists like Loren Coleman are convinced that proof of the unbelievable is within reach. Coleman is the director and curator of the International Cryptozoology Museum (ICM), and has been researching and writing on the subject of cryptids since the 1960's, becoming "one of the world's leading cryptozoologists."³ Such a title certainly implies authority, but what does it mean to be an authority on highly speculative matters? Coleman has a background in zoology and anthropology, and the museum attempts to spin the story of cryptids in the light of scientific discovery. This is an unexpected approach; I believe there are more appropriate and compelling ways to exhibit the subject matter, and as I will discuss in the following analysis, the ICM is most effective as testament to a collector's obsession.

The museum is situated at the back of Green Hand Books, an unassuming second-hand bookshop on Congress Street. Enter the store and you will be greeted by an 8-foot-tall sculpture of the "Crookston Bigfoot," an artist's rendition of the lesser-known 'sub-species' of the figure that could be considered the icon of cryptozoology. It is notable that the museum-goer is greeted by Bigfoot: the sculpture is a sensational attention-grabber, and an internationally-recognized spokesman of absurd pursuits, or rather, pursuit of the absurd.⁴ Furthermore, the museum is sequestered in a way that draws parallels to the peepshow or freak show, and takes on a tawdry, illicit quality. I found myself vainly searching for something reminiscent of P.T. Barnum's American Museum, or even Charles Wilson Peale's museum of wonders hidden behind the velvet curtain. Both Barnum and Peale were purveyors of the absurd, the former tending toward pure spectacle and the latter utilizing spectacle to share a sense of wonder for natural America. Peale's museum, being the first

¹ I use the term 'science' to describe cryptozoology with trepidation. Many cryptid enthusiasts come from a background in scientific research, but the study of cryptids cannot be described as a 'hard science' due to the fact that the hypothesis of, say, Bigfoot's existence cannot be tested using experimental, empirical, or quantifiable data. However it is interesting to note that there are other 'soft' sciences (like the social sciences and forensics for example) that also rely on speculative research.

² Coleman, Loren, "Cryptozoology FAQ," http://www.lorencoleman.com/cryptozoology_faq.html, 2003-2007.

³ Coleman, Loren, "The Cryptozoologist Loren Coleman," <http://www.lorencoleman.com/cryptozoologist.html>, 2003-2007.

⁴ Here I use the term 'absurd' to refer to an idea which is 'contrary to all reason or common sense,' the definition according to dictionary.reference.com.

of its kind open to the public in America, served the purpose of enlightening and acculturating⁵ the common American citizen. The American Museum on the other hand, with its focus on displays of living human oddities, was popular for the same reasons freak shows and tabloid newspapers are popular. We are rarely invited to openly ogle the differences of strangers. A visit to Barnum's museum satisfied that urge, and could be seen as a performance of normalization, an opportunity to create a sense of citizenry united in contrast to the "other."

Coleman's International Cryptozoology Museum does not foster a sense of citizenry, and quite unfortunately fails to capture that essence of grandeur, spectacle, and wonder the visitor might have encountered with Barnum's and Peale's collections. An exhibit pertaining to fantastic creatures - imaginary or real - should be rooted in a sense of wonder for the natural world. Every ecosystem is brimming with bizarre organisms that consistently prove that fact is indeed stranger than fiction. There are deer with fangs (the water chevrotain of tropical Africa) and animals that light up in the dark (fireflies and bioluminescent squid), so why this burning desire to prove the existence of creatures that hold more power in our imaginations than they would if proven real? This is a question Coleman's museum fails to ask, caught up as it is in the quest for scientific proof. What would become of Bigfoot if we finally caught one? Another animal to add to our endangered species list, threatened by overpopulation, pollution, and destruction of habitat, and forced to suffer the indignities of being put on display? I'd say Bigfoot is better off left undiscovered.

If it were not for the museum tour guide who met me at the back of the bookshop, it would have taken me some time to discern an organizational pattern to Coleman's collection. The small rooms that make up the exhibition space are stuffed with taxidermied animals, photographic reproductions, castings, models, maps, and plastic figurines competing for space in glass cases and table tops. The clutter is overwhelming, with few visual cues as to where or how to look. The docent guided me through this confusion of displays, which he explained were grouped according to type of cryptid. Here are the water-dwelling beasts, featuring the FeeJee Mermaid (a hoax, he admits) and the infamous Nessie (no definitive proof either way), followed by a large glass case of various incarnations of Bigfoot, Sasquatch, and yeti, mostly in the form of stuffed animals and toys. The next room contains castings of Bigfoot footprints, a case displaying comic books about cryptozoology featuring none other than Loren Coleman, stuffed and mounted jackalopes, and various three-dimensional depictions of cryptids from the chupacabra to the mothman.

Very few artifacts, save the footprint castings and some hair samples from an "unknown primate" found near Bigfoot sightings, represent "real" evidence. In fact the majority of the exhibits are comprised of plastic figurines and toys portraying both real and cryptid animals. One wall is taken up by a giant model of the coelacanth, the strange-looking fish that was discovered in the 1930's off the coast of South Africa. Interestingly, the coelacanth is the figure that graces the ICM's logo - not Nessie, not Bigfoot, or any other more recognizable cryptid. The coelacanth, I discovered, holds much appeal with cryptozoologists because no one suspected its existence before it was discovered. That is, it resembles fish found in 80-million-year-old fossils, and its recent (re)discovery represents hope to the crypto community.

As my tour progressed through the museum, a theme developed based on a three-fold classification: there are "real" cryptids like Bigfoot, hoax cryptids like the FeeJee Mermaid, and then real animals that once held cryptid status, such as the coelacanth. These once-cryptid animals, including the okapi and giant panda, are offered as proof, ipso facto, that the "real" cryptids do exist and will be discovered. This classification system could potentially draw a powerful parallel

⁵ 'Acculturation' refers to the act of assimilating to a new culture, which is, in a sense, what Americans were faced with upon independence from Britain. As The Academy of Natural Sciences states, we were 'eager to establish a new national identity.' A visit to Peale's museum, full of wondrous specimens from the natural (American) world and paintings of Revolutionary War heroes, would have played an important role in the reiteration of a new culture. See bibliography for citation: http://www.ansp.org/museum/jefferson/otherPages/peale_museum.php.

between the topic at hand - myth versus fact, and how the two coexist - and the inextricable terms of authenticity and authority that are implicit in the museum setting. Rather than expose these potent issues and encourage the museum-goer to question the roles of both fact and myth in our lives - as well as the voice of authority that deems one more important than the other - the narrative of the ICM once again becomes mired in the stagnant, unimaginative waters of scientific proof.