

NYTimes: DIME MUSEUM, Baltimore / LYNNE ARANY

<http://select.nytimes.com/search/restricted/article?res=F40C17F73E540C718CDDAC0894D9404482>

Shocking! Amazing! Sensational!

May 2, 2001, Wednesday

By LYNNE ARANY (NYT); Museums

Late Edition - Final, Section H, Page 2, Column 1, 436 words

DISPLAYING ABSTRACT - American Dime Museum in Baltimore, which opened in 1999, evokes 19th-century dime museum, which offered oddities of natural science

The New York Times

MUSEUMS

Shocking! Amazing! Sensational!

By LYNNE ARANY (NYT)

Published: May 2, 2001

HERE'S the deal. You come to the American Dime Museum in Baltimore, just north of downtown -- a remarkable collection of sideshow and circus arcana -- sure that you cannot be "humbugged." But by the time the proprietors, Dick Horne and James Taylor, are through, your perspective on what is real, or not, is up for grabs.

At first, their collection, opened in 1999, may seem like a haphazard assortment of the Shocking!, Amazing! and Sensational! -- mummies, mermaids, unicorns, two-headed calves, a giant ball of twine, a board of nails, Lincoln's last meal, shrunken heads. In fact, it is nothing less than a real-deal evocation of 19th-century dime museums.

Began as places where urban Americans of every class could appreciate the oddities of natural science, dime museums responded to a market that cried for the fresh and novel. As Andrea Stulman Dennett says in "Weird and Wonderful: The Dime Museum in America" (New York University Press, 1997), an "owner had to become a showman to survive." P. T. Barnum and Charles Willson Peale, two of the earliest dime entrepreneurs, helped to fill that bill.

Barnum, who was never shy about challenging his public, had not-so-natural Fiji mermaids and Samoan Sea Wurms on hand from the first. The making of "gaffs" -- sideshow-speak for anything altered or faked -- became an industry itself. A Peruvian Amazon mummy made by the Nelson Supply Company in Boston was the "finest quality to be found." There were "genuine" unicorns -- goats whose horns were changed with a little help from a California rancher.

Mr. Horne is an old hand at the gaff himself. His Shy Dwarf of San Vincente, a petite relative of the Amazon mummy, has its rightful place next to an ever-growing assortment of sideshow stuff, including Victorian ornaments made with human hair, a "Midway in Miniature," vibrantly colored signs and, of course, a Peruvian Amazon mummy.

The space is growing, and live performances are part of the show. Fire-eaters! Sword-swallowers! Phrenologists! Contortionists!

In the grand tradition, something for everyone.

American Dime Museum, 1808 Maryland Avenue, Baltimore. (410) 230-0263; www.dimemuseum.com.

Photo: OH, DOCTOR -- Among the Barnumesque attractions at the American Dime Museum in Baltimore is this "genuine unicorn," a stuffed goat surgically altered by a California rancher. Dime museums sprouted all over the country in the 19th century, catering to Americans' curiosity about natural science -- and their taste for the bizarre. (Marty Katz for The New York Times)

