

The Day the Diorama Died

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The death of the classical diorama has not been exaggerated. The medium is now technically extinct largely because the labour required to make an exquisitely resolved diorama is so expensive. Moreover, the static view of nature epitomised by the diorama's 'frozen moment' is no longer reflective of the dynamism of contemporary scientific practice nor does it acknowledge that environmental change is inevitable. Paradoxically, while it has become a lost art, the notion of the diorama has maintained its grip on the public imagination, coming to represent an imprecise and nostalgic longing for the 'old museum'.

In their heyday, dioramas created an opportunity to view an animal at close range. The stillness of a classical diorama is spellbinding. The illusions on which they were created hark back to the straight lines and vanishing points set out by Leon Battista Alberti in the Renaissance. The laws of perspective that governed dioramas went so far as to determine the exact spot for a visitor to stand so the whole scene came into harmonic view. In a period before interactive multimedia, dioramas proscribed an ideal place and time for the viewer; such was the power of the museum patriarch in the 20th century.

Many miniatures, such as those at the Australian War Memorial, use similar optical principles but require a more advanced form of suspended disbelief, as viewers must come down to the level of the miniaturised world displayed in front of them. Because natural history dioramas are generally life-sized and use real animals with real fur, they tend to engage the imagination more directly. Specialised scenic artists were adept at blending objects and foliage with the backdrop with painstaking attention to scale consistent with the rules of perspective. The finest examples of classical dioramas exhibit a miraculous fusion between two and three-dimensional elements.

Museums still rely on spatial environments that have their origins in the diorama. The Forest Gallery at Melbourne Museum takes the notion of immersion to another level, using landscape architecture and senses such as scent and sensitivity to temperature to affect our experience. Whereas the subjects of traditional diorama alcoves are kept separate in time and space, a visitor to the Forest Gallery is taken through time seamlessly. The 'old' Academy of Sciences in San Francisco had a diorama hall in which successive windows took the visitor back through time to view past epochs. The strength of the Forest Gallery, is the visitors' journey through time, from Gondwana, to the appearance of flowering plants in Australia and onward through time to experience the impact of bushfire on human occupation. And each period is reinforced with radically compressed views that are the equivalent to those provided in front of each alcove in a hall of dioramas.

The out-dated notion of macho-heroism fed the production of the classical diorama. Dioramas were often used to depict fierce animals at close range. The spirit of the legendary hunter and taxidermist Carl Akeley still haunts the dioramas in the American Museum of Natural History in New York. Akeley's career is marked by apocryphal stories of misadventure, including the killing of a leopard with his bare hands. When he died on expedition, his companions interred him in the very site that was featured in his celebrated diorama of Mountain Gorillas. Fortunately perhaps, the natural history documentary has supplanted the diorama as the means by which we can all have a privileged experience of rare or perilous nature.

The diorama expired unexpectedly on the day when movement was introduced behind the alcove. While acknowledging that extinction is the flip side of evolution, should we be concerned about the rate of change?

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For an article by John Kean on Museum Victoria's, McCoy Hall Dioramas go to: <http://museumvictoria.com.au/history/dioramas.html>

Above: Children looking at the Kangaroo Diorama at Museum Victoria's Swanston Street campus pre 2000. Courtesy of Museum Victoria. Photographer David Loram.

*Right: Midget Library, Glasgow, David Bryce & Son, c. 1895. Rare Books Collection, State Library of Victoria (SLV). The fantastic Midget Library contains twelve volumes including the New Testament, poems, a dictionary and a tiny alphabet of birds and animals. The Library is on display in the *Mirror of the Worlds* Exhibition currently on at the SLV. Explore it at: <http://www.mirroroftheworld.com.au>*

Far right: Cockington Green miniature village. Photo courtesy of Cockington Green.

Diminutive objects and tableaux draw us into the arrested life of the miniature. They are even more appealing when the craft of their making is boggling in its detail. But, after the initial allure has passed, why do we still find small creations fascinating? Linda Young has some ideas on the appeal of miniatures.

Think of a kitten, a netsuke, a postage stamp: why are small things so appealing? A model train, a doll's house, a miniature village: they're irresistibly engaging.

To my mind, the main reason has to be that we who gaze on the miniature are so much bigger than it is. As the adult is to the child, bigness makes one capable and independent. To put it crudely, the big have power over the small. And a sense of power, or at least agency, is a deeply satisfying assurance in human consciousness. The child who plays with toy models not only learns cultural norms and develops motor skills to handle the material culture of the adult world, but builds confidence in controlling the apparatus of adult life. Thus, to manipulate the miniature is to assert mastery in the world. Remember what a delight it was to build a sandcastle, and the equal pleasure of knocking it down?

The model train landscape and the doll's house are archetypes of the gratification of controlling miniature things. I vividly recall my lust and amazement on being introduced to my grandmother's doll's house at about eight years old. The way the façade doors swung open on the furnished rooms filled my fingers with the glorious power to assert my understanding of what the world should be. I soon learned that the pleasure of the power to intervene in the model universe transmutes into the joy of improving and adorning it. The doll's house (I can now see it must have been c.1900) received a total reupholstering that Christmas.