

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

'Treasures of the Peabody: 150 Years of Exploration & Discovery' Review

By EDWARD ROTHSTEIN
December 7, 2016



Ichthyornis dispar found in Kansas in the 1870s by Othniel C. Marsh PHOTO: YALE PEABODY MUSEUM/ROBERT LORENZ

New Haven, Conn.

The many pleasures provided by the Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History—now celebrating its 150th anniversary—are far greater than you might expect. Here is a university museum that, on the face of it, is dwarfed by monumental urban counterparts. There are far grander dinosaur halls to be found elsewhere (even if the Peabody has the first discovered Brontosaurus). There are more plentiful dioramas in New York and Los Angeles (though the Peabody's can match them in uncanny evocation). And even the lovely new 2,300-square-foot David Friend Hall—with its



theatrically lighted oversized crystals and gemstones and some 150 exquisite rock formations that seemed designed by a cosmic confectioner—can't compete with what you can find, say, in Dallas.

But scale is hardly the point. The exhibition “Treasures of the Peabody: 150 Years of Exploration & Discovery” offers some inkling of what is offered instead. Here, for example, is an 80-million-year-old fossilized bird with teeth (*Ichthyornis dispar*) found in Kansas in the 1870s by Othniel C. Marsh, the paleontologist whose discovery of some 500 species transformed both his field and the new museum. It is accompanied by the replica of an 1880 letter from Charles Darwin to Marsh suggesting that such finds have “afforded the best support for the Theory of Evolution” Darwin has seen. These historic landmarks are peppered by curiosities from the 13-million-object collection: the skull of a quagga (an extinct zebra), Ivan Pavlov’s dog-drool collector, Buffalo Bill’s rifle, and tapeworms removed from Yale undergraduates in 1895.

Peabody’s pleasures, though, go further and have extended over decades, as we are reminded in a recent book, “House of Lost Worlds: Dinosaurs, Dynasties, and the Story of Life on Earth” by Richard Conniff. The museum even has a filmography. Cary Grant’s paleontologist in “Bringing Up Baby” (1938)—who works for a Peabody-inspired museum whose fate is in the hands of a lawyer named Peabody—is seeking a missing bone for a specimen very like the real museum’s central attraction. More recently, after the discovery of the dinosaur *Deinonychus* by the Yale paleontologist John Ostrom (1928-2005) led to the reimagining of these plodding creatures as intelligent, agile and feathered life-forms, Ostrom’s ideas were brought to life in Stephen Spielberg’s “Jurassic Park” films; one cinematic model is on display.

What aspects of the Peabody have proved so inspiring? Spend several hours here—looking at the earliest recorded meteor in the New World (from 1807), say, or examining an array of North American perching birds; the effect is unusually intimate. The museum is remarkably free of commercial clamor and condescension, and free too of the political posturing that can make it feel as if curators were wagging fingers through display cases. The Peabody re-establishes the natural history museum as the domain of impassioned collectors and teachers.

The museum really is a product of such figures. The traditional natural history museum cultivates a more mythic, monumental posture, as if it were recounting humanity’s emergence from geologic forces, demonstrating the triumph of Western science and culture. This grand scheme has given these museums their temple-like aura and peculiar domain (encompassing American Indian artifacts along with geologic specimens). But this model has also inspired rebellion, as multiculturalism and other ideologies have jostled to displace the founding vision, which, in response, becomes mired in ardently assumed (and sometimes justified) guilt.

But Mr. Conniff’s book shows how the Peabody was shaped by a series of devout men who became explorers, researchers and the first scientists at Yale. Benjamin Silliman (1779-1864) was a professor of “chymistry and natural history” who built the most important American mineral collection—the foundation of the museum’s holdings. He also started the *American Journal of Science* in 1818, which Thomas Jefferson, toward the end of his life, considered “select reading for which alone I have time now left.” His student James Dwight Dana (1813-1895) wrote texts that are still used about mineralogy and geology, inspiring, like Marsh, enthusiasm from Darwin, who found “so much originality in all your works! It frightens me to think of it.”



As for Marsh (1831-1899), his uncle was George Peabody, who built a fortune as a commodities trader and merchant banker whose firm's New York-based descendant became J.P. Morgan & Co. (Victor Hugo called Peabody a man in whose face "we can see the smile of God"). Marsh became

an ardent paleontologist, leading Yale students on expeditions to the West beginning in 1870 and discovering the museum's great specimens—after he had convinced his uncle to finance the museum in the first place.

Yale provided the museum's scholarly backbone, but Mr. Conniff suggests how tenuous university support often was. This may have been a good thing—the Peabody was guided by disciplines and not by external pressures. The museum devoted itself to an evolutionary perspective but felt no need to seduce with special effects or to court large audiences or follow grander mandates. It has been instrumental in conservation efforts because of the strength of its research. It does not preach.

The one issue on which the Peabody has been drawn into controversy was over artifacts from Machu Picchu found by Hiram Bingham III during Peruvian expeditions beginning in 1911. Peru wanted the artifacts repatriated. Ultimately a compromise was reached: A joint research center and museum was established in Cuzco, Peru, in 2013.

So what are the Peabody's pleasures? Partly because it has been overseen by impassioned collector-scholars and has avoided ideological posturing, it does not feel institutional. And partly because ecological apocalypse is not a central preoccupation, humanity is seen not as Nature's great disrupter, but, still, as Nature's great explorer, seeking to understand the world. That is a pleasure, now all too rare.

—*Mr. Rothstein is the Journal's Critic at Large. Follow him on Twitter @EdRothstein.*