

The Museum Of Curiosities

by Lynne Belluscio

One of the earliest museums in the United States was opened in Philadelphia in 1786 by the famous artist Charles Peale. The museum featured hundreds of natural specimens, mastodon bones and Peale's portraits of famous Americans. The museum was among the first to adopt Linnaean taxonomy. Most other museums and exhibits presented their artifacts as mysterious oddities of the natural world.

For a while the museum collection was housed in Independence Hall but the museum closed in 1810. Four years later, Charles' son, Rembrandt Peale erected a building in Baltimore. It was the first building in America devoted solely as a museum.

Fossils collected by Thomas Jefferson were displayed at the Peale as well as objects collected by Lewis and Clark. When the museum closed again, many of the objects were purchased by P.T. Barnum and moved to New York. (In 1928, a new Peale Museum was created in Baltimore. It was renovated again in 1978. In 1985 it became part of the City life Museum system in Baltimore, but in 1997 the museum closed again and today the building stands empty.)

In the 19th Century, there were a variety of "museums" that were more akin to sideshows than educational institutions. Probably the most famous was P.T. Barnum's Museum in New York City, where he exhibited

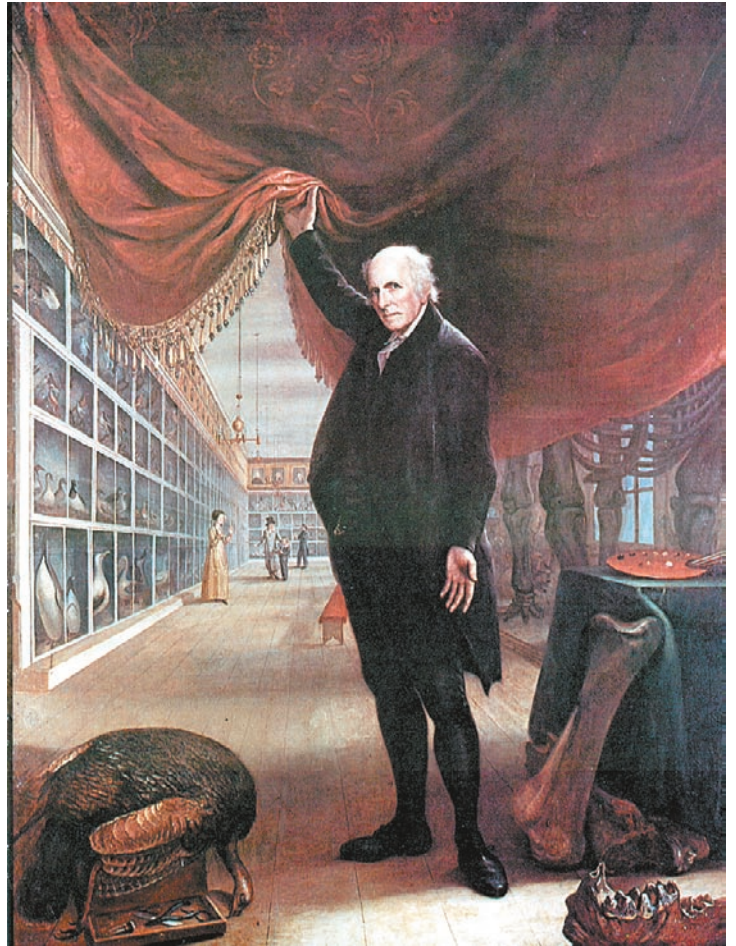
the FeeJee mermaid and other hoaxes.

Barnum began his career by purchasing a blind, nearly paralyzed former slave, Joice Heth, who he claimed was 160 years old. Barnum claimed she was George Washington's nurse. (Of course later, after she died it was proven that Barnum's story was fiction.) Barnum also toured with "General Tom Thumb - the smallest person that ever walked the earth." Thumb was actually a 4 year old boy who Barnum coached to smoke cigars and drink wine.

In 1841, he bought Scudder's Museum in lower Manhattan and renamed it Barnum's American Museum. By the late 1840s Barnum's was drawing 400,000 people a year. The museum burned in 1864 and again in 1865. Again he rebuilt the museum, and once again, in 1868, it burned to the ground. Known as the "Prince of Humbugs", Barnum saw nothing wrong in using humbugs to attract audiences.

Hartford, Connecticut was the home of The Museum of Natural and Other Curiosities. Established in 1797 by Joseph Steward, the exhibits included an eight-foot alligator, albino animals and a two headed calf, as well as rare butterflies and strange mechanical devices. Admission was 25 cents, but the museum closed after Steward's death in 1822. In the 1990s, the exhibits were reassembled and opened to the public.

Probably the most unusual "Museum of Curiosities" was located in England. Created by Walter Potter, an English taxidermist, it featured dioramas of stuffed animals, posed in life-like situations. One of the most famous scenes, which opened in 1861, was the "Death and Burial of Cock Robin" with



numerous birds dressed up, with glass tears on their cheeks and arranged in a story-book setting. "The Kittens Wedding" included 20 stuffed felines dressed in brocade clothes. Known as a "Victorian whimsy" museum, it remained open for 147 years. Even Queen Victoria paid a visit. In 2003, much to the dismay of many people in the area, the museum closed and the contents were broken up and auctioned.

LeRoy had its own "Museum of Curiosities". The Staunton Art Conservatory on the campus of Ingham University, built after the death of Phineas Staunton, contained on the main floor, in beautiful glass cases, the flora and fauna collected in South America by the expedition of the Smithsonian Institution. Other stuffed wild life hung from the walls.

On the second floor gallery were numerous paintings by Phineas Staunton and other Ingham artists. After Ingham closed, the Smithsonian collection was donated to Yale University. (They have no records of this

donation.) and the paintings were sold at auction. Through the years, there have been other exhibitions. During the 1934, LeRoy Centennial celebration, the D.A.R. assembled a large exhibit at the Woodward Library. Many of these objects were later donated to the LeRoy Historical Society.

In May, the LeRoy Historical Society will open a "Museum of Curiosities" in the second-floor exhibit rooms of LeRoy House. Included in the exhibit will be Christopher the giraffe, rare Indian pestle stones, a huge wreath made from human hair, unusual geologic specimens, an 1812 cannon ball, a medal made from melted Confederate cannons, Jenny Veitel's "pussy willow water," and of course - - - the true story of the LeRoy flamingoes. Admission is only 25 cents.

