



# Creationist “Museums” Are Not Museums

by Gretchen Jennings

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Institutions that create exhibitions and displays about creationism and intelligent design are probably protected by the rights of free speech in calling themselves “museums.”

This article first appeared as a letter to the editor in the May/June 2008 issue of *Museum*. It was written in response to an article by Leah Arroyo in the November/December 2007 issue of the same publication on the new Creation Museum in Kentucky. The article, titled “Science on Faith at the Creation Museum,” concluded with the observation that this museum, and others like it around the country, could “push the museum field to redefine what a museum is and what it can do” (p. 49). I expressed my concerns about that conclusion in the letter, and I have added a few clarifying thoughts in the article below:

## **Creationist Museums Generate Useful Discussion**

I agree wholeheartedly that the founding of creationist museums and the desire of some creationists to place their ideas in science museums have generated a great deal of useful discussion among museum professionals. I also think that institutions that create exhibitions and displays about creationism and intelligent design are probably protected by the rights of free speech in calling themselves “museums.” But their assumption of the name “museum” doesn’t mean they are a new type of museum, or any type of museum, in my view. Creationist museums are like negative space in a painting or sculpture. What is *not* there is more important than what is there in terms of helping us think about museums in a new way.

## **Museums Are Evolving**

Museums are living institutions, and they reflect their times and cultures. In the past, museums have presented exhibitions that rested on erroneous and since-revised theories. Examples are theories about the phenomenon of “race,” and about the superiority or inferiority

of some racial groups. While they may have been slow to change, museums have gradually incorporated newer understandings of the human species through the disciplines of history, anthropology, and archeology, among others. The definition of the word “museum” itself has also changed and expanded over the years, from that of an institution with a collection to the most current ICOM definition:

A museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment. (ICOM Statutes, 2007)

A common thread running through all of these shifts in perspective and definition throughout the history of museums is a basic association with and assumption about museums and their connection to human knowledge and experience. This is true of a museum with religious treasures, a museum with a button collection, a botanical garden, or a city history society. There is an implicit assumption that within the walls of something called a “museum” efforts are being made, whether by religious practitioners, academic scholars, local historians, or members of a tribal community, to present what human knowledge and the natural world can tell us about their particular aspect of “the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity.”

## **A Missing Link**

ICOM defines a museum in terms of what it *does* (acquires, conserves, researches,

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communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment) and *why* (in the service of society ...for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment), and this description is all about the very human activity of gathering and communicating evidence of how we came to be here and what we have done. This link with accumulated current human knowledge and understanding is what gives museums whatever “authority” cultural researchers contend that they have with the general population. Whether we think that museums should have such authority is another question, but it is no doubt one of the reasons creationists call their exhibition halls “museums.” The lack of valid connection with current worldwide thinking on their chosen discipline is why I maintain that creationist centers of display are not museums. (I would say the same of an institution whose exhibitions denied the Holocaust) and why AAM and other representatives of the field should not confer this title officially on these institutions in the unlikely event that they might seek accreditation.

### **A Conflation of Science and Faith**

Creationist exhibition centers do not fall within any of the definitions for museums given above, which have to do with human knowledge and experience. These exhibition spaces are based on a conscious conflation of science and faith, two realms that can certainly co-exist and complement one another but that are not by their very nature able to provide verification for the other. The thinking processes and methods of each of these fields are appropriate to the domain but useless in “proving” the tenets of the other. Science cannot prove or disprove articles of faith and belief, and religious faith is something altogether different from

experimentation and verification of hypotheses. Each is a legitimate aspect of human experience, and many people are both religious and scientifically oriented, but each area has its limits when it is asked to attest to the truth of the other. Yet this mixture of science and religious belief is exactly what creationist displays seem to propose.

One may ask how creationist “museums” are different from other museums that present religious or non-scientific accounts of creation, such as the Vatican Museum or the National Museum of the American Indian. I believe they are very different. As far as I know neither of these latter museums contends that their collections or exhibitions are based on Western scientific findings. Images of the creation of Adam and Eve, or accounts of how the world was created are presented on their own terms and within their own context and cultural tradition. They are not justified or promulgated by calling on science. On the other hand, the Creation Museum misuses and misrepresents scientific thinking to support Biblical accounts so that visitors, according to geologist Glenn Stores, “leave misled and intellectually deceived” (Arroyo, 2007, p. 47).

An organization that presents Adam and Eve living in a world with dinosaurs or that displays an accurately modeled triceratops dated 6000 years old is misrepresenting the well-documented “tangible...heritage of humanity and its environment.” As with theories about race, new evidence might be discovered someday that will change our current understanding of how the universe came to be. Until then, all we have to go on is the accumulated knowledge of our fellow human beings—scientists, historians, students of all the

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(continued from page 73)

### References:

Arroyo, L. (2007). Science on faith at the Creation Museum. *Museum News*. 86(6), 42-49.

ICOM Statutes. (2007). Adopted during the 21st General Conference in Vienna, Austria. Retrieved on February 7, 2011 at <http://icom.museum/who-we-are/the-vision/museum-definition.html>

Jennings, G. (2008). Inbox: But is it a museum? *Museum*. 87(3), 87-89.

For further discussion of this topic see Jennings, G. (2007). Museums and cultural understanding. In J. Falk, L. Dierking, and S. Foutz. (Eds.). *In principle, in practice: Museums as learning institutions*. Lanham, MD: Altamira Press.

many facets of the human and natural world. Although the Creation Museum offers the views of various researchers who espouse Intelligent Design, the weight of scientific efforts worldwide does not support their thinking.

A July 17 press release from the Society of Vertebrate Paleontology stated that “Professional paleontologists from around the world are concerned about the misrepresentation of science at the newly opened Creation Museum in Petersburg,

Kentucky,” a “view of earth history that has been scientifically disproven for more than a century.” (Arroyo, 2007, p. 47)

So yes, let’s continue to discuss creationist museums, their cultural implications, and their impact on our current institutions, but let’s not credit them with leading the way to new ideas about museums, except maybe by negative example. There are plenty of other legitimate resources for fresh ideas and innovative approaches to our field. 