Creating and Curating Your Own Personal Museum

Jim Stewart
Curator, The Zymoglyphic Museum

Fernando Cospi's personal museum, 1677

Introduction

Personal museums are a woefully underutilized medium for personal creative expression. One of the Zymoglyphic Museum's goals is to facilitate the creation of such mini-museums, so our education department has taken it upon itself to compile this handy guide to creating your own museum.

Our approach takes its inspiration from the curiosity cabinets, popular at the dawn of Europe's age of discovery. These early museums were more noted for their variety than for being scientific or educational, and showcased rare and wondrous objects.

Many people once had childhood museums, or created little scenes in the woods, or are driven to collect sticks, rusted objects, gnarled roots, flea market oddities, skulls, or general detritus. The conceptual framework of a museum can be a useful way of bringing some sort of organization and significance such an accumulation.

In a personal museum, these objects become souvenirs of trips to the far realms of the curator's consciousness. They may suggest a story or they may simply be interesting on their own, either as single objects or as interesting juxtapositions.

An eclectic collection of objects displayed in the style of a 17th century curiosity cabinet

Basic principles

The collection

A museum is ideally a collection of wondrous objects, arranged and presented in such a way as to intrigue, mystify, amaze, educate, or otherwise entrance the visitor. In a personal museum, the objects need not be valuable, rare, or historically important; they just need to express an important part of you, possibly in ways you are unable to explain. Ideally, when you are in your museum, it will feel like an externalized version of what's inside you.

Creator or curator?

A personal museum can be a mix of objects that you have made and objects you have collected—you can have a dual role as creator and curator. As a creator, the museum approach encourages variety in what your create. You can assign creatorship of what you make to yourself or to imaginary entities.

Is it art?

Art is a combination of craft, concept, and personal expression. Anyone can make art—there is a craft element, but it has been optional since the Dadaists declared readymades to be art over a hundred years ago. The goal here is an amalgam of objects that becomes a personal expression. If you wish, you may present the museum as conceptual, performance, or installation art.

If calling it "art" inhibits you for fear you will be judged on composition, artistic value, or some arcane criteria that you are not privy to, then don't call it art; just do what you feel like doing. It's a hobby, if you need a word. However, as Marshall McLuhan said, "Art is anything you can get away with." You can justify anything by calling it art. If you want some odd object, you can always say, "I need it for an art project."

Is it real?

A personal museum can have each of its metaphorical feet in the realms of the real and the unreal. It is under no obligation to present its findings and research as being literally true. You may

choose to make your visitors wonder what is true or not. The Museum of Jurassic Technology, for example, specializes in this approach.

Will it be profitable?

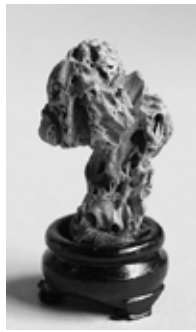
Art is not generally a viable economic proposition—supply exceeds demand—so it makes more sense to do what you find satisfying and not let salability affect it. A museum approach is more amenable to showing your work than to selling it. There are ways in which a museum can bring in cash, such as charging admission, getting donations as a nonprofit organization, or selling souvenirs in a museum shop, but primarily museums are subsidized by public funds and/or wealthy benefactors. Your museum will likely be subsidized from your personal funds unless you can find a wealthy and willing patron. Attempts at monetization in any case should not be allowed to distort your personal vision of what the museum should be.

A collection of crabs illustrating natural variations on a theme

Things to do

Collect

Pick up or purchase objects that speak to you in some way. These objects may be found at thrift stores or garage sales, or they may be souvenirs of events or places you've been to, artifacts of personal importance, or beach finds. Pick some ordinary objects that stand out in some way from the background. You don't need to know or explain why.



Frame objects and collections

Objects take on significance when framed. A worn sea object (right) becomes an object of contemplation when oriented just so and placed on a pedestal; a simple collection of crabs (left) shows the wondrous variety in a related group of animals.

Make artifacts

In collecting, you are primarily relying on the inherent "interestingness" of objects, rather than making something yourself, but there are easy ways to create artifacts as well. For example, assemblages can be made from the objects you collect. Ideally, you will have an exhibit preparation area where you can spread out your finds and see what goes with what. As with collecting, you don't need to articulate the rationale for what you make—that will come later when you develop a theme and narrative.

A "Rust Age" artifact made from a rusty doorbell, a rusty washer, a cowry shell, and a large, barnacle-encrusted nail

Be spontaneous—just try making things with no preconceived notions and see what happens. A certain arrangement may take on a sort of glow of significance; it may be much later before you realize what the actual significance of the arrangement is.

A small diorama constructed from an angel Christmas ornament, a piece of roadway, a discarded candy wrapper, bones, leaves, dirt, and other natural objects, all in a 10-gallon aquarium tank

Create dioramas

Dioramas are special type of display, an illustration of a scene, a narrative moment frozen in time. They can be constructed in 10-gallon aquarium tanks, which are generally cheap and come with built-in lighting. Alternatively, you can construct custom vitrines out of sheets of clear acrylic. After a diorama is completed, you can fill in the narrative and add explanatory signage.

Dioramas may have either a terrestrial or a dry-aquarium theme. If you are a painter, you can incorporate backdrops for your scenes, or simply paint the glass black on three sides to make a visual enclosure. Scenes themselves may be constructed from papier-mâché or other techniques, or simply made just of natural materials (a bed of soil, sand, or moss). Model railroad literature has lots of tips on how to create convincing miniature landscapes.

Build the museum

The interior of the Zymoglyphic Museum as seen through a pinhole camera

The possibilities of the museum building are limited only by your means and available space. If you ever harbored dreams of being an architect, this is your chance to design and build an ideal edifice. Or you can simply acquire one—the Zymoglyphic Museum, for example, was once housed in an 8x12 prefabricated shed that was delivered and set up in a day. The Museum of Unnatural Selection was created out of a shipping container. You may devote a room in your house to your museum, or even convert a dollhouse to be a museum. The Zymoglyphic Museum has a number of miniature works mounted on pedestals and installed in a series of shoeboxes.

There are two basic types of display strategies, and you can use a mix of both. Specimens and artifacts may be neatly organized and accurately labeled, as in a modern museum, or displayed as jumble of widely disparate items whose cumulative effect is wonder rather than education. The latter approach was popular in the early days of Wunderkammern.

Objects take on air of significance if they are displayed in vitrines or bell jars and/or on pedestals or in a display case. Cases, shelving, and vitrines may be constructed or purchased, depending on your carpentry skills and interests. Signage may be ornate or simple, cryptic or clear.

Most museums have more holdings than have room to display them. If this becomes true in your case, you can have rotating exhibits.

Create themes and narratives

In the course of your collecting, making artifacts, and creating dioramas, look for themes that you can articulate or build on.

Some tips:

- Perhaps you had collections or a little museum when you were a child, or made scenes in the woods—tap into that for your current museum theme.
- Let the objects that are close together suggest a compelling combination
- Mix the scientific and the fantastic
- Create artifacts of an imaginary civilization

Document the collections

Taking pictures of your objects can be a creative project in itself. Well-photographed objects can look more interesting in the photograph than they do in real life. Taking photographs of dioramas presents its own challenges! Pinhole photography, for example, in particular works well with dioramas due to its great depth of field.

If you are not inclined toward photography as a medium of expression, encourage others to take photographs in your museum. Museums are very interesting environments for photographers and their interpretations may surprise you.

Document the museum

Many museums have guidebooks, often subtitled "A guide to the collections". These make excellent souvenirs for visitors to take home for reference. They are also an opportunity to showcase your photographs if that is an area of interest, or to expound on the founding principles and themes of your museum, or write up any narratives that are too long for your museum signage.

Create a persona

At a minimum, your role is the curator or director of the museum. You may want to flesh out the persona by taking on an imaginary alter-ego. For example, for his Wonders of the World Museum, Clayton Bailey became Professor Gladstone.

Clayton Bailey in persona as Dr. Gladstone in his Kaolithic Wonders of the World Museum, 1976

Outreach

Visitors

Once the museum is complete, it could become a private sanctuary for contemplation, since the museum will be like being inside your own subconscious mind. Most likely, though, you will want to have visitors. This is a good way to meet like-minded people. You can be open regularly or occasionally depending on your tolerance for talking to strangers. If your area has an annual Open Studios tour, you can participate in it (you will have to claim, of course, that your museum is an art project). The Atlas Obscura sponsors annual tours to unique places including personal museums. If you are comfortable having people show up at any time, you can get listed with Roadside America.

A Web site

Having a web site makes it possible to for people unable to visit your museum to know something about it. While not the same as visiting, it is better than nothing and may lead to interesting correspondence with like-minded people. A web site also enables you to link to like-minded sites who may well return the favor. You can also have an online version of the museum shop and online exhibits related to your theme.

A Web site is a good creative opportunity if you are interested in learning web technologies, graphic design or user interface design. The details of how to set up a web site are beyond the scope of this book, but here are some recommended design goals

- Keep it simple: have thumbnails to let visitors choose what looks interesting, and don't let the web design distract the focus away from your content
- Consider a fictional front end—a visitor may cruise around the site without ever really knowing what's going on, or they can look at an "About" page to get the real story.
- The site may be ever-evolving, but it should always appear complete at any given time (no "under construction" areas)
- Support random navigation. Most users will enter the site on some random page due to a search, rather than coming in through the front page

A blog

Maintaining a blog has many uses:

- Notification of events at the museum. Potential visitors can subscribe to your blog so that you need not update it frequently, if blogging is not your main task. At a minimum you will want to announce when the museum will be open.
- Share background and details about selected objects and exhibits
- Showcase writing and/or photography if desired—A nice format for a blog is a good picture accompanied by short, well-written text, with links for further reading,
- Links to like minded people. As of this writing, blogs seem

to be more popular than web sites for connectivity and there is more cross-linking than with web sites

• Promote other artists and institutions with a compatible mindset, especially those with little or no internet presence

The museum shop

Museum collections are not for sale, but museums generally provide gift shops that have items for sale. Large museums do this to make money, but it is unlikely that a personal museum's shop will, so think of it as a promotional enterprise. You can design t-shirts, or other souvenir items that visitors can take home as souvenirs of their visit. Companies such as Cafe Press and Zazzle will make limited run of objects with your designs. You can also sell your guidebook and any other books related to your museum theme.

Zymoglyphic drinkware and t-shirts available in museum's shop

Promotional materials

• Have business cards with a picture and the museum's URL available in your wallet, should the topic of "what do you do" come up in any social context.

• Consider having a tri-fold brochure available at the museum so visitors can have something tangible to bring home and possibly reference later. This is an opportunity to boil down your vision of the museum to its essence and present it succinctly in words and pictures.

Get other people involved

The institutional identity of your museum means that there are predefined roles that others can play in your museum

- Interns and volunteers—people who help out with various tasks while learning about what your museum does for the community
- Donors—Once your museum is established, you will probably find people wanting to donate items to it, often items that they themselves have collected but do not have a proper context for. You may wish to acquire these objects or encourage the donors to set up their own museums.

In Conclusion

The Zymoglyphic Museum would be most interested in hearing about any projects resulting from or inspired by this pamphlet! Contact the museum at info@zymoglyphic.org

Resources

Books

Arany, Lynn and Archie Hobson *Little Museums: Over 1,000 Small (and Not-So-Small) American Showplaces*

Brown, Vinson *Building your own Nature Museum*

Mauries, Patrick *Cabinets of Curiosities*

Neal, Arminta *Exhibits for the Small Museum*

Putnam, James *Art and Artifact: The Museum as Medium*

Stocking your curiosity cabinet

See zymoglyphic.org/shop.html for a list of purveyors of oddities that you may find intriguing

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