

The Zymoglyphic Museum: Semiotics of a Fictocryptic Portland Institution

Stanislaw Strzybisz (The Fictocryptic Institute)¹

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ABSTRACT

The Zymoglyphic Museum is an enigmatic institution whose purpose and mission remain obscure despite diligent efforts on the part of researchers to weave its many loose threads of meaning into some coherent framework. The author here presents an overview of the museum as physically constituted, then undertakes a novel interrogative-analytical approach to excavating the essence of the museum from its many layers of metaphysical crust, culminating in an analysis of the key question, “What does ‘zymoglyphic’ mean?”.

BACKGROUND

The Zymoglyphic Museum is sited at the base of an extinct urban volcano in a bucolic neighborhood of Portland, Oregon, colloquially known as “Tabor Holler”. The museum outwardly resembles nothing so much as a carriage house or freestanding garage with a second story added atop. A modest sign on the door identifies the museum and lists the few hours that it is open to the public. An enormous douglas-fir tree looms over it.

¹ Stanislaw Strzybisz is the founder and principal of the Fictocryptic Institute, an anonymously funded think tank whose mission is the study of organizations and organisms that exist in the realm between the possible, the probable, and the imaginary.



Fig. 1: Exhibit preparation area

THE EXHIBITS

Upon entering the museum, visitors are directed (sometimes ushered) past the chaotic exhibit preparation area that comprises most of the first floor [Fig. 1], through a small stairwell gallery and up the staircase to the exhibit halls. The first exhibits encountered, near the top of the stairs, are collections of specimens from the natural world—a small mineral cabinet² an array of picture rocks (presented as a miniature art gallery), a crab collection, shadowboxes with rows of neatly pinned insects, and the museum’s signature collection of Xenophora (sea snails that collect objects and are billed as “Assemblage Artists of the Deep”)³ [Fig. 2].

The east wall of the museum ushers us into the Rust Age of the Zymoglyphic region. Here, we are introduced to the ancient culture for which the museum is named. These excavated and reconstructed artifacts range from “primitive” pieces such as “Guardian Figure” [Fig.3], “Shamanic Figure”, and “Wooden Mask” (presumed to have been used in various

² “In large calm halls, a stately Museum shall teach you the infinite, solemn lessons of Minerals” Whitman, W. *Leaves of Grass* 1871

³ Giaimo, Cara “Up Close and Personal With the World’s Most Artistic Mollusks: Deep sea ‘carrier snails’ painstakingly turn their shells into tiny dioramas.” *Atlas Obscura*, April 18, 2017

THE PEOPLE'S COLLOQUIUM

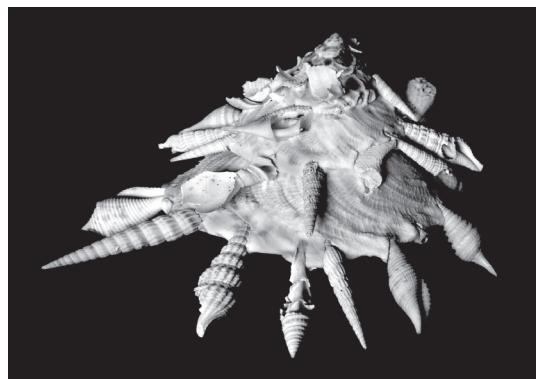


Fig. 2: *Xenophora pallidula*, from the museum's Xenophora collection



Fig. 3: Rust Age figurines, including Guardian Figure (left)

spiritual practices) to more functional items such as bioluminescent fungus lamps and pre-literate books. As this was a pre-literate culture, the actual meaning of these objects is speculative at best and based on similar cultures that have survived into the modern age. However, even divorced from any original spiritual function and mounted trophy-like on the wall of a museum, these artifacts retain a fascination based on their aesthetics alone.

Continuing clockwise around the main exhibit hall, we enter the Age of Wonder. This area has won the museum a reputation as being itself a “wunderkammer” in the Renaissance tradition⁴; this belief in turn has led some to believe that the museum is simply a collection of oddities in the tradition of Ripley or Barnum. One display, the wall-mounted curiosity cabinet [Fig. 4], has clear parallels to Europe’s so-called Age of Exploration, with its fascination with newly discovered, fanciful creatures, and artifacts from exotic cultures.

In addition to representative artifacts from the Age of Wonder (a strange alchemy apparatus crude orrery, various memento mori⁵, miniature grottoes, etc.) there are a number of enigmatic poster-size illustrations purporting to showcase life in the Zymoglyphic region during this period, the imagery apparently cobbled together from alchemical, allegorical and other sources.

The Age of Wonder hall includes a number of dioramas, large and small, containing natural objects and figures arranged with some narrative theme. The smallest ones, contained in ten-gallon fish tanks,



Fig. 4: Wall-mounted curiosity cabinet

⁴ "...a goodly huge Cabinet, wherein whatsoever the Hand of Man by Art or Engine has made rare in Stuff, Form or Motion; whatsoever Singularity, Chance, and the Shuffle of things hath produced, whatsoever Nature has wrought in things that want Life and may be kept, shall be sorted and included" Bacon, Sir Francis *Gesta Grayorum* 1594

⁵ Memento mori were inspirational objects with skull, bone, and other death motifs intended to remind you of the inevitability of your ultimate demise and thus motivate you to make good use of your remaining hours.

THE PEOPLE'S COLLOQUIUM



Fig. 5: Display typical of the Era of Oriental Influence

glyptic explorers during the Age of Wonder made contact with a culture whose aesthetic was immediately seized upon. Overly elaborate art works fell out of fashion in the region, and in their stead appeared small, quiet, serene works made for contemplation, perhaps a simple tray landscape or a gnarled rock or stick mounted on a stand. They were generally displayed in special shelving [Fig. 5].

The final portion of the tour brings up to The Modern Age, showcasing the latest technological advances in Zymoglyphic aesthetics. The futuristic exhibit “The Aquarium of Tomorrow” is a cybernetic wonder that generates a hypnotic, never-repeating virtual aquarium from such basic elements as pixels, lines, circles, color, motion, chance, algorithms,

resemble dessicated terraria and aquaria, often giving the impression that some living creature may yet survive in them. Two larger dioramas (estimated at 180 and 500 gallons respectively) are unenclosed and spill out somewhat into the visitor space. Unlike the natural history museums of our region, it seems there was no requirement for the narratives in these scenes to be a literal recreation of events in the natural world, only that they primarily consist of natural objects. This combination gives them a dreamy, mythical air while consisting of undeniably material, often ordinary, components.

Around the corner from the dioramas we find the Era of Oriental Influence exhibit.

According to the label, Zymo-

and feedback loops. On another screen, the “views” from the Age of Wonder have been animated into a sort of wordless documentary. As modern times continue, more exhibits may be expected here.

We now find that we have come full circle and are back where we started. The future of exhibit development seems to be linking the modern age with the far past, all the way back to the Mud Age, attempting a laboratory recreation of the primordial ooze in silicon- and hydrocarbon-based life forms.

THE MUSEUM'S SOCIAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT

The museum has an ambiguous relationship to the Portland community. The curator, sometimes glimpsed scurrying in the shadows, is rumored to be a Silicon Valley refugee and thus considered an invasive species by some Portland residents. Others welcome the museum as a worthy successor to such no longer extant Portland institutions as the Faux Museum and the Bathtub Art Museum. A local “alternative-weekly” periodical recently included the museum in its “Best of Portland” issue only six months into the museum’s operation.⁶

Museum logs tally 591 visitors to the museum in its first seven months of operation (January through July of 2017). Average attendance is 35.9 per open day, with a range from fourteen to sixty-four. Time spent by visitors in the museum area ranges from ten minutes or so (presumably those for whom the museum was not what they were led to expect) to well over an hour (often a patron intent on comprehensive photographic documentation).

Visitors to the museum primarily divide into two groups: those for whom the museum is a prime exemplar of “quirky Portland” (these further divide into out-of-town-visitors who have heard about the museum⁷ and locals who are either new to the area or have a visitor in tow) and a more select group comprised of those who have similar tastes

⁶ Korfhage, Matthew “Best Rogue Taxidermist” *Willamette Week*, June 12, 2017.

⁷ Visitors primarily learn of the museum through the popular off-beat-travel Web site *Atlas Obscura*

THE PEOPLE'S COLLOQUIUM

Echinodermata		Mollusca		9	
Name	Scientific Name	Family	Order	Class	Where Found
1. Purple Starfish					Beach + 3
2. Green Starfish					Moss
3. Orange Crab					Beach 2
4. Red Crab					Beach
5. Mole Crab					Wade in Art 3
6. Mole Crab					Bay
7. Hermit Crab					Beach

Fig. 6: Page from original museum catalog, 1960

and are pleased to find that they are, and perhaps always have been, zymoglyphiles. These latter, if local and sufficiently enthusiastic, are rumored to be recruited by the curator into a shadowy organization or cult for acolytes of the Zymoglyphic Way.

INTERROGATIVE ANALYSIS

Certain questions come up repeatedly as visitors interact with the curator, and examining them is key to determining community expectations of the museum and thus an indicator of what the museum means to the community. No records have been kept of exact number of times a given question has been asked, but there is a short list of frequent interrogatives.

“How long have you been doing this?”

As the roots of the museum date back nearly a half-century this question can have a very long answer. The museum is at heart a vastly expanded and metastasized version of the curator’s (unnamed and very literal) childhood museum of rocks, shells, arrowheads, marine animals, insects, and bits of history⁸, adding an aesthetic overlay, presenting natural creations as art objects, and expanding into other media.

⁸ Stewart, Jim “Science Notebook and Catalog”, MS 1960 See Fig. 6

“Did you make all of this?”

People are often as concerned with the provenance objects in a museum as with its immediately apparent aesthetic properties. This question helps to distinguish the museum as a proper museum (a themed collection of objects from various sources) from a “museum” (possibly an art installation to be credited to a specific person).

“What’s your favorite piece?”

This is thought to be a question that deflects attention from the patron’s response to the museum onto to the curator’s intention. The curator’s standard answer deflects back, something along the lines of “I see it as all one unified work so I can’t pick out any favorites.”

“Do you sell your work or is this just a hobby?”

This question of course presupposes that art must have a monetary value in order to be taken seriously, or that the artist must make art-making a career in order to be taken seriously.

“What IS that thing?”

Many objects in the museum, like the museum itself, are ambiguous in nature. Natural objects placed in a novel context, a scene in diorama for example, may become unrecognizable.

“What does ‘zymoglyphic’ mean?”

This deceptively simple but deeply semiotic question is at very heart of any zymoglyphological analysis worthy of the name. It is invariably the first one formed on the lips of a novice or unprepared visitor to the museum. A formal definition of the word is posted in two places in the museum as well as on the museum’s Web site [Fig. 7], but even after reading it, and visiting the museum, one may well wonder exactly what makes a given object, collection, idea, or environment truly “zymoglyphic”.

Zymoglyphologists and related scholars have debated the deeper meaning of the word for a long time. One researcher’s empirical ap-

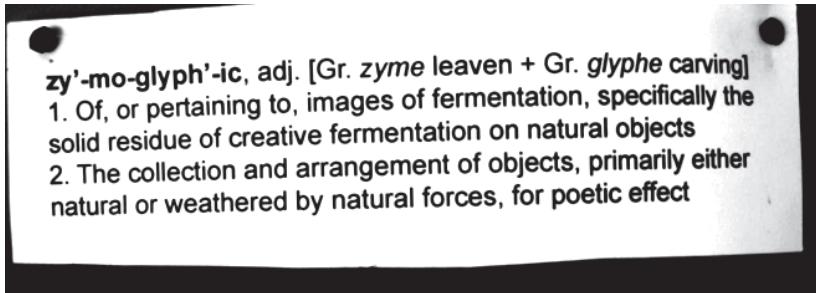


Fig. 7: Sign with formal definition of the term “zymoglyphic”

proach posited that anything included in the museum was by definition zymoglyphic and proposed a taxonomy of the museum's exhibits, holdings, and other entities⁹.

- Specimen collections (pure naturalia, similar to a natural history museum)
- Natural objects collected and recontextualized as art objects
- Slightly modified natural objects (usually adding an eye or two, or placing miniature figures on an object to make a landscape)
- Assemblages of natural objects and/or decayed metal, with or without backstory
- Curiosity cabinets (jumbled collections of naturalia and artificialia, including anonymous art made by others (“folk art”, indigenous art) and art by known artists

This attempt was ultimately abandoned in the face of an unceasingly bewildering array of media still to be dealt with (postage stamps, animation, computer programs, abstract paintings and so on) and the further complication that entities can be contained within other entities, thus requiring a hierarchical, if not downright fractal, taxonomic design. With the usual hackneyed plea for “further investigation”, these researchers threw a gauntlet down which has yet to be taken up.

⁹ Strzybisz, S. “Taxonomy of objects in the Zymoglyphic Museum” Proceedings of the Society for Esoteric Museology, January, 2016

In fact, every part of the museum, from the whole down to the individual objects and components, seems to exist in an indeterminate state of not falling into one category or another. It is not strictly speaking a literal museum or an installation art piece. Individual pieces often rely on parts that seem to be one thing but are in fact something else. One could claim that, as with quantum mechanics, the ambiguity does not resolve until there is an observer to make it happen.

A related question is “Is it art?” Are parts of it art and parts not? Is a crab collection art? Does a non-art object become art by being placed within an art context? Are the items available in the museum shop, such as postcards, art? Is the whole thing a single, integrated, work of art as the curator implies? Does it matter? The museum and its curator seem to have no art world connections in the way of credentials or gallery affiliation, the sole exception being an essay written by a noted Los Angeles art critic in which he defends the museum’s claim that “nature can make art”.¹⁰

Others have argued that the museum is akin to a living organism and that any part of it ceases to have life once removed from the context of the museum.

A more fruitful approach may be a parallel to the Surrealist search for the marvelous, defined as follows: “a state of extreme poetic tension at which inner and outer realities are joined and the individual is simultaneously one with himself and the world, thus recovering the true sense of the sacred”¹¹

Ultimately, there does not appear to be a quantifiable answer to the question of what “zymoglyphic” means. Empirical approaches break down due to the inherent ambiguity of the subject, and deductive approaches are similarly stymied. Each new approach brings more questions than answers. A gauntlet is hereby thrown.

¹⁰ Frank, Peter “The Art World Beneath our Feet: *The Zymoglyphic Museum and its Mission*” in Stewart, Jim *The Zymoglyphic Museum: A Guide to the Collections*, 2nd edition, 2010

¹¹ “Mabile, Pierre *Mirror of the Marvelous* 1962”