

Museum Musings

Written by Jack Sparacino

Wednesday, 08 October 2014 06:41 - Last Updated Wednesday, 08 October 2014 06:42



Museum: a building in which interesting and valuable things (such as paintings and sculptures or scientific or historical objects) are collected and shown to the public.

It's good to separate this definition from the term *museum piece*, which can refer to an object that is worthy of display in a museum or a person or object viewed as "old-fashioned, irrelevant, or useless." Guess I'd better tread lightly here in digging into a recent news item that caught my attention. It concerned the Vent Haven Ventriloquist Museum, located in Fort Mitchell, Kentucky.

Vent Haven offers the "world's only museum of [ventriloquial](#) figures and memorabilia. Its collection contains more than 700 objects and character dolls from twenty countries related to ventriloquism, including dolls that belonged to

[Edgar Bergen](#)

." And Paul Winchell and Senor Wences among many others. The facility was launched by William Shakespeare Berger, a Cincinnati businessman and amateur

[ventriloquist](#)

. He assembled the vast collection for 40 years.

The museum is only open from May through September, on weekdays, and by *appointment only* . For

anyone fascinated by show business, carvings or dolls, Vent Haven offers a fine venue for dummifying up. Wooden you like to visit this collection? For those of us who might be creeped out by staring at all those odd grinning faces, curator Lisa Sweasy says that there's nothing to be frightened of, including the harsh makeup and fixed stares: "Ninety percent of ventriloquism

is uplifting and funny and cute. Clowns are scarier." Ooohh, clowns!

It turns out that this hall of dummies is special but not unique, as there are plenty of other quirky museums to visit. They include (no kidding):

Connecticut Resources Recovery Authority (CRRRA) Trash Museum (Hartford, CT)

In most cities, and certainly here in the lowcountry, we're encouraged to properly dispose of our trash and recycle. In Hartford, there's a museum that features a sculpture made up of just trash. This destination provides a no cost history of junk and recycling operations to its high class (non-trash talking) visitors.

According to CRRRA.org, "Visitors to the CRRRA Trash Museum may tour the 6,500 square feet of educational exhibits beginning at the Temple of Trash. Learn about the problems of old-fashioned methods of disposal, such as the 'town dump.' From problems, the tour moves to solutions, including explanations of source reduction, recycling, trash-to-energy and landfills."

Hoarders beware! Here's a reminder to clear out our cluttered attics and get down to basics.

International Towing & Recovery Hall of Fame and Museum (Chattanooga, TN)

This museum pays an overdue tribute to the venerable towing industry. See restored wreckers on display, some dating back to the dawn of the industry. One of the most popular features is the "Wall of the Fallen," which memorializes those who have lost their lives on the towing job. A good thing to remember the next time your spouse asks you to (*c'mon, honey*) haul away a piece of junk. [*Wh at, you wanna land me in that exhibit?]*

National Mustard Museum (Middleton, WI)

Hot dog! Some museums feature fine art, including priceless paintings. This one pays tribute to mustard. NMM has collected mustard brands from around the globe, more than 5,000 different varieties. Got a few wienies among your friends who like road trips? How about lonely bottles of

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condiments lurking in the back of the fridge? Been sitting on your buns too long and just need to get out of the car and stretch?

World's Smallest Museum (Superior, AZ)

The only thing smaller than itty-bitty Superior (population 3,158) is the museum there, checking in at 134 square feet. In that miniscule space (just think what a clever realtor might call it, efficient?) visitors encounter interesting artifacts, "including pieces of pottery and antique cameras." (Not them big movie cameras from the 1930's, neither!)

Salem Witch Museum (Salem, MA)

Witch way to Salem? The Salem witch trials some 350 years ago represent some of the most tragically unenlightened moments in colonial America. Salem, however, worked up the courage to build a museum dedicated to that strange time. Wicked cool displays simulate life back in that era. "There is also a gorgeously constructed statue of the town's founder, Roger Conant, standing out front." And seriously, how many gorgeous statues have you seen lately?

Museum of Bad Art (Dedham, MA)

This one really calls out to me. It houses some of the "most tacky and unfortunately put together pieces of art" that were ever created. What else is there to say?

Museum of Clean (Pocatello, ID)

Idaho is well known for potatoes but not necessarily famous for its museums. One of the biggest ones (no, not potatoes) in the state is dedicated to old cleaning products. It's just as exciting as it sounds, and has turned into a real attraction. Would you believe it's been featured on the CBS Evening News? And would you rather hear more about this or continue to be deluged by stories of forest fires, floods, deadly viruses and Mideast chaos?

Burlingame Museum of Pez (Burlingame, CA)

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This museum claims to house an example of every Pez dispenser ever made. To help get you prepare for this trip, it's good to know that Pez was first marketed as a "compressed peppermint sweet" in [Vienna](#) in 1927 by candy maker [Eduard Haas III](#). Haas invented peppermints using his family's baking powders, and decided to serve the mints in small, hand-size containers. He manufactured a small tin to hold the mints.

The first Pez mint dispensers were shaped like a cigarette lighter, and sold as a breath mint marketed as an alternative to smoking. The first character dispensers included [Santa Claus](#) and [Mickey Mouse](#)

. Over 1500 Pez dispensers have been created since 1950 and yes, they've made a mint from them.

These real museums got me thinking. Many of us like to store things and collect something or other. So there's probably a need out there somewhere for more places to share our pet interests with the public. A few ideas for new museums occurred to me.

One is the **No-See-Um-Museum**. Us lowcountry types are way too familiar with these annoying pests, sometimes called sand flies. Given their tiny size, this museum can afford to be compact. In keeping with no-see-ums' habits, the building would only be open when the weather is ideal and there's little wind. I envision halls devoted to insect repellants and a visual history of bug bites. And how about a little shooting range with miniature slingshots to keep the kids busy? If all of this drives visitors buggy, they'll be itching to relax in the adjacent snack bar, designed to resemble a tent in the woods and feature huge fans. (Don't worry, the staff won't bug you to order until you're ready.)

What about a **baloney museum**? Featuring not just cold cuts but tall tale exhibits including a huge mural depicting the history of malarkey. We'll make sure the tour guides have appropriate backgrounds in bridge selling, fortune telling or Ponzi schemes, maybe, and can say, "Gee you look great, Mrs. McGillicuddy" convincingly.

Are you with me so far? OK, good, now how about a museum dedicated to procrastination... well, maybe we can put that one off for a while.