

The New Criterion

Books

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Shorter notice

by [James Panero](#)

On *Windows on Nature: The Great Habitat Dioramas of the American Museum of Natural History*
by Stephen Christopher Quinn

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Windows on Nature:
The Great Habitat Dioramas
of the American Museum of Natural History.
(Abrams, \$40)

by *James Panero*

“With its great holdings of magnificent background paintings, sculptural taxidermy, and models of unique botanical specimens, the American Museum of Natural History could be considered the Louvre of diorama art.” So begins a lush new book that is a joy to behold but melancholy to contemplate. Like many of the animals depicted herein, diorama display-making is an endangered art, its extant specimens in need of their own preservation. *Windows on Nature* is therefore a welcome publication, part of the museum’s continued efforts, in the book’s own words, “to take steps to conserve and preserve these great exhibits—like their living counterparts in the wild, they are in danger of extinction.”

The naturalist and artist Stephen Christopher Quinn, on staff at the American Museum since 1974, now a legend in the field, has matched photographs of the museum’s famous nature dioramas, from early to mid-century, with a concise and often gripping account of their creation. Quinn explains the techniques of their construction: the curved background paintings drawn from studies in the field and transferred to paint with mathematical precision, the recreation of native flora and other scenery, and the sculpting of animals from bones, clay, and preserved hide.

The term “diorama,” derived from the roots *dia* (through) and *horao* (view), was coined by Louis Daguerre in 1822. In 1889, the self-taught naturalist Carl Akeley used this style of illusionistic painting and scenery to construct the first habitat diorama. His small marshland scene of muskrats is still on display at the Milwaukee Public Museum.

By the late nineteenth century, “cycloramas featuring great battle scenes of the Civil War—utilizing both curved and painted backgrounds and three-dimensional foregrounds and figures—were making news as popular and educational forms of entertainment.” It was not long before the modern museum, most notably the American Museum under Akeley, recognized the educational power of diorama display.

But who knew diorama-making could be so dangerous? In 1896, while collecting specimens for the leopard diorama, as told in *Windows on Nature*, one of the wounded animals charged Akeley,

knocking the rifle out of Akeley's grip, and sank its teeth into his upper right arm. Akeley fell on top of the leopard and by working his arm free of the animal's biting jaws, he was able to force his right hand into the leopard's mouth and down its throat while clenching it in a chokehold with his left hand. . . . Akeley was able to overpower and strangle the leopard with his bare hands until, "little by little her struggling ceased. My strength had outlasted hers."

Akeley once had a similar run-in with a charging African elephant, which tore off part of his face. Yet he survived both encounters to die of natural causes in the field in 1926, buried at the base of Mount Mikeno, now depicted in the museum's mountain gorilla diorama.

In 1936, the opening of the Akeley Hall of African Mammals at the American Museum "marked the birth of the golden age of the diorama, when nature seemed enshrined in a grand architectural space." This reverential room of two levels of dioramas surrounding a herd of elephants (one collected by that wondrous specimen of rugged individualism, Theodore Roosevelt himself) is beautifully represented in *Windows on Nature*. The room is a masterly exposition of the art form—the diorama-maker's Bayreuth. Here the display glass is angled down to deflect glare and reflection. Forty-foot-high ceilings and walls covered in dark serpentinite dwarf the elephants at the center.

At the time of its construction, two-thirds of every dollar of the museum's budget went to diorama displays, which still populate the halls of the museum. Yet institutions like the American Museum have themselves become endangered species. Just a century ago, a combination of Rough Rider toughness, scientific confidence, and faith in the transformative power of education gave rise to the country's most advanced institution for the study and display of ethnography and the natural world. Today, the American Museum remains true to its mission. But it struggles for survival in a habitat of cultural sensitivities, legal barriers like the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, as well as the threat of poststructuralist big game hunters.

One such academic with a taste for institutional fare is Marianna Torgovnick. A Duke Women's Studies professor, Torgovnick would undoubtedly like to hang the American Museum's equestrian statue of Theodore Roosevelt as a twelve-point buck on her office wall. In 1991, she took her best shot by publishing *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives*. Here she sought to "problematize" the museum experience and draw attention to the underside of the museum's animal and ethnographic dioramas.

Their function is "educational"—they preserve for Western eyes vanishing curiosities. We are not supposed to ask, as my children did when I took them to see the dioramas, "did they have to kill the animals to bring them here?" That is a given, the price of progress, of education—or so I said to my children when asked. But my young children had grasped an essential point. These "life-like" displays bespeak the death of animals, and the death of cultures. Their existence can be justified by their ability to "salvage" vanishing forms of life by their education value; but their ideological basis and their origins in conquest, killing, and appropriation remain suspect.

When the day comes for the Duke faculty to be preserved, stuffed, and mounted alongside other intellectual curiosities, perhaps this touching vignette of poststructural scold with children will be the one put on display. Thanks to pioneers like Carl Akeley, there will be no better place for it than in the American Museum of Natural History.

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