

DIORAMA

INVENTING ILLUSION

OCTOBER 6, 2017 – JANUARY 21, 2018

WALL PANELS OF THE EXHIBITION

INTRODUCTION

The exhibition “Diorama” offers the opportunity to step into the theatrical mechanisms of a diorama—a word which literally means “to see through.” This form of display is a staging device used to create a scene—real or unreal—in which historical figures or animal species are usually exhibited within their natural environment. The diorama, often conceived as a life-sized model, features a display case with a window, a painted background, and three-dimensional props in the foreground. Despite the physical barrier of the window, the viewer is projected into a virtual world that is also a metaphor of the exhibition itself.

“Diorama” investigates the various origins of the diorama—the theater invented by Daguerre in 1822—as well as habitat groups in natural history museums and ethnographic dioramas emerging over the course of the nineteenth century. The diorama’s didactic value has been discussed ever since the first museums in Sweden and the United States installed them in the late nineteenth century. Today many museums use alternative forms of display, and the dioramas are starting to vanish from the museum world. Nevertheless, the diorama—as well as its deconstruction—is still a source inspiration for contemporary artists from various cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

Viewed as a symbol of the world expansion and domination of men, the making of dioramas was driven by the ambition to encapsulate all recorded knowledge in a single space. Staging a realm of optical illusion in which laws of perception are constantly challenged, the diorama is a world of fantasy but also a critical platform for artists. What if the world we live in were nothing but a large diorama in which we experience the spectacle of our own life?

CHAPTERS

1. THE ORIGINS OF THE DIORAMA

In 1822, Louis Daguerre (1787–1851) and Charles Bouton (1781–1853) took advantage of the craze for panoramas to open Diorama, a particular kind of theater venue in Paris. The two men found immediate success, with crowds thronging to witness the magic of this theater where painted images gradually transformed under light effects. In the early nineteenth century, the first dioramas were huge background compositions painted on both sides of a semitransparent canvas. These trompe l’oeil compositions came to life using lighting tricks, reflective mirrors, and colored glass plates, creating a range of atmospheric effects—fog, sunlight, and darkness. As spectators witnessed both spectacular historical events and current headlines, they were invited to travel to exotic and faraway lands as the boundaries of time and space were suspended.

Another—much older—inspiration for the modern diorama was found in three-dimensional scenes of biblical stories or the lives of saints that became extremely popular in the sixteenth century. After the Council of Trent (1545–1563), the Catholic Church looked to reassert its

supremacy against the rise of Protestantism. During this crucial episode of the Counter Reformation, art became a valuable means for establishing religious faith through the power of aesthetic emotion. Besides life-sized scenes in the churches, three-dimensional, small-sized paintings served as private devotional objects at home. Many of the latter were created in the workshops of convents, demonstrating the daily life dedicated to serving God. Whether those scenes were miniature or life-sized, particular attention was paid to the facial expressions, the skin's texture, the clothes and decor.

2. WINDOWS INTO THE WORLD

The field of taxidermy greatly evolved over the course of the nineteenth century. No longer satisfied with simply stuffing animals for scientific conservation, taxidermists started to bring life into their work by staging the dioramas with extreme realism. Famous companies for taxidermy emerged during that period, such as the Maison Verreaux in Paris (1803) and the Rowland Ward firm in London (1870). The latter developed the "habitat groups," a form of collective display of animals grouped in their natural environment, which became highly popular among the wealthy European clientele of safaris.

Natural history museums quickly recognized the pedagogical value of dioramas. Contrasting with the scientific taxonomy of species in museum displays, dioramas presented the animals in their natural environment, thus contributing to the emergence of ecological awareness.

Renowned naturalist and taxidermist Gustaf Kolthoff designed his first dioramas in 1875 in Kalleviken, Sweden. In the United States, Carl Akeley, who is well known for his dioramas at the American Museum of Natural History in New York, created his first habitat group at the Milwaukee Public Museum in 1889. In Frankfurt, the Senckenberg Naturmuseum unveiled its first diorama in 1908. While the Frankfurt dioramas were all destroyed during the Second World War, the ten famous dioramas at the Hessisches Landesmuseum Darmstadt (installed in 1906) survived and are still on view.

Despite their spectacular theatricality, dioramas were nevertheless conceived with a genuine concern for scientific accuracy. They were the result of remote expeditions and involved a large number of participants, such as painters, carpenters, taxidermists, molders, sculptors, and botanists.

3. A BRIEF HISTORY OF HUMANKIND IN DIORAMAS

The first ethnographic dioramas emerged in the museums of northern Europe in the 1870s and soon spread throughout the continent. As showcases of the power and wealth of nations, dioramas displayed the extent of their colonial conquests. By means of papier-mâché and wax figures, dioramas enabled a great number of visitors to discover the everyday life and traditions of the colonies. As real tools of propaganda, these scenes embody the delusion of a society in which the white man had reached the pinnacle of evolution.

In the context of European history ethnographic museums looked to the diorama as a means to preserve local traditions and beliefs on a path to extinction. Considered as an important museographical revolution, the diorama instilled life into the objects on display, thanks to the staging of life-sized wax figures dressed in traditional clothes. Defenders of tradition hoped to use them to freeze in time a disappearing heritage. Georges Henri Rivière, founder and director of the Musée national des arts et traditions populaires that opened 1937 in Paris, transformed this phenomenon into a true scientific program. He dispatched researchers across France to collect tools, clothes, images, and sounds in an attempt to document and preserve the nation's rural life.

4. THE GREAT HALL OF DIORAMAS

Once dioramas started being considered obsolete forms of display advocating old-fashioned values, they got withdrawn from museums, which opted for new educational tools. However, artists cherished the world of fantasy and melancholia encapsulated in those small cases.

The violent rise of hypermodernity in the twenty-first century challenged the persisting old world views which dioramas were meant to preserve. The industrialized nightmares of the urban world became the subject of contemporary dioramas by artists such as Mark Dion. The representation of an idealized world in harmony with its environment, rooted in old beliefs, was challenged by artists. In *Bête Noire* (2014), Kent Monkman merges the past with the present and challenges colonial visual culture, dismantling the romantic ideal of the vanishing indigenous peoples.

As beliefs and ecosystems were knocked down, the spectator's gaze lost its privileged position at the center of viewing mechanisms. The window that separated the ideal world collapsed, deconstructing the illusion, leaving only a ghost behind.

SCHIRN KUNSTHALLE FRANKFURT

ARTISTS

KENT MONKMAN

Going on a school trip as a kid, Kent Monkman (*1865) discovered the life-size dioramas of the Manitoba Museum, the heritage and science museum in Winnipeg, Canada. Captivated by the beauty of the vitrines depicting indigenous peoples, he nevertheless found it difficult to articulate the contrast between the idyllic state of those sceneries and his own experience of the poverty of indigenous peoples, including the racism he had suffered because of his Cree ancestry.

Standing in front of the landscape of the American West, inspired by Albert Bierstadt's painting *The Last of the Buffalo* (1888), the mannequin of Miss Chief Eagle Testickle is riding a motorcycle. A sexually ambivalent character and alter ego of the artist, Miss Eagle "represents an empowered antidote to colonized sexuality, as well as the gender variance that was present in traditional indigenous cultures across North America when the settlers arrived." The three-dimensional representation of Miss Chief as a hunter stands in contrast to Picasso's collage of a flat Cubist bull that she has just shot down with two pink arrows.

ARNO GISINGER

The subject of the seven photographs that make up Arno Gisinger's (*1964) series *Faux Terrain* is the historic panorama of Innsbruck. This painting, which was inaugurated in 1896, uses a racy, realistic style to retrace Tyrol's battle for independence in 1809 and became a site for Austrian commemoration and national glorification. By reproducing certain fragments of the painting, Gisinger plays with the classical form of frame and picture. The isolation of the image, as well as the use of black and white, wipe out any narrative effect, thus deconstructing the illusion of a historical scene for the spectators. For the "Diorama" exhibition, three elements from the series have been printed at a greater scale, creating tension between photography and the initial panorama. Through this indirect view, "favoring a greater frontality," Gisinger has chosen to adopt a distance from his subject. He thus examines the use of a historical event in the construction of a collective consciousness. At the Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt, *Faux Terrain* is juxtaposed by photographs from the 1998 series *Betrachterbilder* in which Gisinger captured the visitors of the Innsbruck panorama and their reactions.

MARK DION

The diorama *Paris Streetscape*, which was conceived for this exhibition, reproduces an urban Parisian landscape. Submerged in litter, plastic, and various wrecked objects, nature has now been banished from the city. Inhabited by urban species, this diorama breaks with the idyllic vision of traditional depictions of animals amid their natural ecosystems. In this dystopic yet quotidian installation, the artist illustrates the transformation of the environment through the lifestyles and consumption habits of mankind.

Mark Dion (*1961) focuses on the question of how nature is depicted in natural history museums. The use of the diorama has led him to explore the frontiers between scientific objectivity, aesthetics, and social or political ideologies.

RICHARD BAQUIÉ

For the last twenty years of his life, Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968) worked in secret on the production of a posthumous work, *Étant donnés: 1° la chute d'eau / 2° le gaz d'éclairage*, a diorama that can be seen through a broken brick wall. He accompanied this piece with a guidebook explaining how it should be displayed after his death. In 1969, the Philadelphia Museum of Art inaugurated it, without a vernissage and in complete discretion. It then became a kind of artistic testament.

Fascinated by its inaccessible, erotic, and mysterious character, Richard Baquié (1952–1996) decided to follow the instructions left by Duchamp and reconstructed the very same diorama. While presenting the identical succession of scenes—the gaze first crosses a wall into a penumbra and then sees a naked female body, facing a landscape—the work here can be seen from all its angles. Baquié thus reveals the wings of the diorama and the construction of the illusion to the spectators, as if to demystify the fantasies surrounding it.

MATHIEU MERCIER

By placing a couple of axolotls—kind of fish with feet—at the center of his work, Mathieu Mercier (*1970) upsets the nature of the diorama, those three-dimensional environments that attempt to create an illusion of life. Possessing both gills and lungs, the axolotl can regenerate its own members after amputation. In extreme conditions, it has the capacity to metamorphose, shifting from a larval, aquatic state to a terrestrial one. “What interests me here is the way it is viewed. Ideas about the possibility of an evolution come to us immediately: they’re intrinsic to its form. We discover the interchangeability between what is called real and abstract.” When placed in a display case, an aquarium comes over as a *mise en abyme* of the diorama, wavering between the scientific and the spectacular, between illusion and the depiction of a living being. Here, Mercier has recreated an environment which is as artificial as it is archaic, thanks to the use of peat, an organic fossil matter formed by the accumulation of dead vegetal waste. This passage from water to earth thus suggests a process of evolution, embodied by this hybrid species.

CHARLES MATTON

Charles Matton (1931–2008) was well known for making *boxes*, which he conceived as a reflection of the actual world we live in. They stood in contrast to natural history and ethnographic dioramas, which usually represent remote geographical areas and a distant past. Some of his boxes recreated real life with extreme attention to detail, while other boxes were inspired by his reinterpretation of personal memories of artists. Matton’s artistic creativity was driven by both ethical and aesthetic concerns, such as the series of *Studios* which were conceived as tributes. *L’Atelier d’Alberto Giacometti* (1987) looks like an exact replica of Giacometti’s studio. Charles Matton reproduced the dim light and the tools scattered in the studio: small glass bottles, brushes, newspapers, plaster bits. However, Matton did not wish to replicate a sculpture by Giacometti; instead he made a cloth to hide the work, protecting it from the dry air and from the gaze of the spectator.

HIROSHI SUGIMOTO

When Hiroshi Sugimoto (*1948) photographed the famous collection of dioramas in the American Museum of Natural History, New York, in 1976, he declared: “I noticed the resurrection of a polar bear on the film. It was then that my life as an artist started.” Seduced by the ambiguity of these

artificial scenes that suggest a form of life, the artist decided to “freeze” them through the medium of photography.

The use of black-and-white film and long exposure photography—about twenty minutes—unifies the surface of the image and wipes out the three-dimensional character of the dioramas. The tight frame also isolates the artificial scenes from their museum context and supports the impression of realism. The viewers are directly confronted with the animals—without any barrier—surrounded by their natural habitat. Considered as the artist’s very first work, *Dioramas* is an ongoing series that Hiroshi Sugimoto has been pursuing in natural history museums all over the United States.

MARVIN GAYE CHETWYND

As the daughter of a set designer mother, Marvin Gaye Chetwynd (*1973) grew up in the world of theater and film, surrounded by props and sketches for sets. This early encounter with the stage greatly influenced her artistic practice, which operates in the area between performance, sculpture, painting, installation and video. In *Diorama*, Chetwynd presents a sequence of five dioramas, each of which tells a story, either one experienced by Chetwynd herself or one heard second hand, which visitors can listen to via headphones. All five dioramas and stories explore the relationship between real life and fiction, because for Chetwynd, “truth is often stranger than fiction.” In this work the artist combines elements of the classic diorama – backdrops, three-dimensional objects, and theatrical illumination.

JEAN PAUL FAVAND

In 2007, Jean Paul Favand, creator and director of the Musée des Arts Forains in Paris, acquired a nineteenth-century mechanical theater used by the Van de Voorde family. Amongst the various objects that belonged to this theater, dioramas were found, now considered extremely rare, surviving examples of this old device. Jean Paul Favand restored the fragile canvases, using traditional methods and new technologies, such as computerized systems that control the light and orchestrate the score of various events. *Naguère Daguerre 1* represents the sun going down in the Bay of Naples. Jean Paul Favand recreated the canvas’s shifting atmospheres to depict the eruption of Mount Vesuvius. The video projection and the movement of torches give life to the whirls of smoke.

WALTER POTTER

As a countercurrent to the naturalistic dioramas with their concern for realism and scientific precision, the taxidermist Walter Potter (1835–1918) created dioramas reminiscent of the fantasy universe of fairy tales. He took up taxidermy at the age of fourteen and opened his own museum in his native town, Bramber, in the south of England. At the end of his life, his collection contained around 10,000 specimens.

Inside the diorama *Happy Family*, different animal species have been brought together, which normally do not coexist, to form a “happy family.” Birds, rabbits, squirrels, mice, a monkey, and a cat seem to be living together in perfect harmony. This fantasy scene illustrates an iconographic Christian scene that was fashionable in the Victorian era: the kingdom of peace, an idealized state in which predators and prey cohabited. Walter Potter gave the animals’ poses and expressions a strange human impression. He thus established himself as one of the most famous representatives of anthropomorphic taxidermy. Animals are disguised and staged in everyday actions. This diorama displays humorous, even eccentric imagery, typical of Victorian Britain.

GERRIT SCHOUTEN

Gerrit Schouten (1779-1839) was born 1779 in Paramaribo, the capital of Suriname, which was then a Dutch colony, of a Dutch father and a Creole mother. As a self-taught artist, he became highly renowned for his glazed boxes, with painted gouache backdrops, inhabited by figurines and papier-mâché objects.

These dioramas stand as a vibrant historical illustration of daily life in the colonies in the nineteenth century. *Maquette de carbet* (1839) thus plunges the viewer into an Indian camp in the Caribbean, amid children, dogs, and birds. In a luxuriant forest, some people are coming back from a fishing trip, while others are resting in hammocks or butchering an armadillo beside a fire.

Europeans who passed by in Suriname were delighted by such folklore souvenirs. These dioramas influenced the construction of an exotic, idealized vision of the colonies. The first Creole artist to be recognized for his talents, Gerrit Schouten passed away in 1839 without ever having been accepted by the elites of his country, due to the color of his skin.

ROWLAND WARD

By using both his anatomical knowledge and his sculpture and painting skills, the British artist Rowland Ward (1848–1912) revolutionized the art of taxidermy. He gave life and form back to the animals' remains, which he placed in spectacular, dramatic scenes. Initially the apprentice of his taxidermist father, Ward constantly experimented with new techniques and regularly went to the zoo to study the living animals. He opened his first store in London, which became one of the most successful firms for the preparation of hunting trophies.

The height of Rowland Ward's success went along with a general discussion about the role of museums and a desire to transform the presentation of stuffed specimens. Ward's work had a huge impact on the diorama's shift from a scientific approach to more spectacular sceneries. In the late nineteenth century, Ward was asked to create the dioramas for the collection of the Duke of Orléans, which have been part of the collection at the Muséum national d'Histoire naturelle since 1926.

GEORGES HENRI RIVIÈRE

Georges Henri Rivière (1897–1985) was the creator of a new museum style. He aimed to preserve the beliefs and local traditions that were threatened by extinction, while injecting life into the objects on display. This was an ethnographical renewal, in which a demand for scientific precision was accompanied by a will to transform museums into an active part of social life.

George Henri Rivière played a decisive role in the reorganization of the Musée d'ethnographie in Trocadéro before he founded the Musée national des arts et traditions populaires in 1937, a "laboratory museum" which aimed to fill the gap of university research on popular French culture, while offering an innovative museum approach. "The objects aren't isolated, as in a scientific collection, but grouped together to form an overall picture. We can see the entire room and all of its contents." The presented installation *From the Cradle to the Grave* is a significant example of Rivière's "ecological units"—a visual expression of ethnographic scientific research and Rivière's ambition to turn the museum visit into a leisure activity. All objects and labels are original.

EDWARD HART

The five ornithological dioramas from the Horniman Museum collection and the Gardens of London were made by Edward Hart (1847–1928) with a truly remarkable attention to detail. The movement suggested by the birds' postures and the delicacy of the composition of the various scenes provide a disturbing realism, despite the smaller dimensions of the boxes. In 1834, his father William Hart founded a lucrative taxidermy firm. Hart learned all the skills required for this craft at the age of ten, when he killed and stuffed three sandpipers. He quickly developed his own style and established a more educational approach. Hart staged the animals in a reconstruction of their natural environment. By using watercolor backgrounds and including vegetation in the foregrounds, he provided the illusion that the diorama is a fragment taken from nature.

CARL AKELEY

This section unravels the making of dioramas through the iconic example of the Mountain Gorilla diorama which bears personal meaning to the life of its own creator, Carl Akeley (1864-1926). Taxidermist, explorer, naturalist and sculptor, Akeley's greatest life achievement is the Akeley Hall of African Mammals which opened at the New York's American Museum of Natural History in 1936 after his death. Spanning a wide range of species and geographical areas, the great hall is a staged, almost cinematic, experience in which 28 lit dioramas are plunged in dark corridors. Akeley invented a new artistic approach to taxidermy technique in which the sculpted figure of the animal is covered by a tanned skin. In order to accurately study the anatomy, he also invented a motion picture camera, often compared to a shotgun, that could capture the animal living in the wild. His wife Delia Akeley was an explorer and also played a key role in the collection of specimens during expeditions.

The Mountain Gorilla diorama represents a big silverback gorilla dominating the tropical forest of Mount Mikeno and whose sense of drama is emphasized by the volcano in the painted background. During the 1921 expedition in the now Democratic Republic of the Congo, Akeley, who was concerned with the decline of the African wildlife, conducted the first scientific study of the gorilla in its natural habitat. Specimens were collected and notes, photographs, films and landscape studies were made to aid in the creation of the diorama background painting and foreground details back in New York. A plaster mask impression was modeled after the dead gorilla along with its hands and feet. Akeley's affection for gorilla's is evident in his bronze bust, *The Old Man of Mikeno*: writing to a friend, he noted, "I am really fonder of him than I am of myself." Akeley's concern for the survival of gorillas grew and his efforts directly led to the creation of the first national park in Africa, Parc National Albert – now Virunga National Park – in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Akeley returned, with background painter William R. Leigh, to the same site five years later, where he died of natural causes.