

Skeletons, Spiders and Mortality

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You don't have to be 100 years old to have memories of the Museum of Natural History, although that distinguished institution is celebrating the centenary of its construction this month. For generations of New Yorkers, the images are indelible: the welcoming blue whale, the plaster Indians hurling immobile spears from silent canoes poised on motionless seas in dim, nocturnal rooms; the pleasurable shock of giant prehistoric skeletons looming over fragile fossils; the transparent woman displaying the secrets of life in technicolor plastic tubing; the regiments of spiders with long, Latin names; the skulls of Homo sapiens offering lessons in anthropology and mortality.

For children, the museum is still a world of wonder—of many worlds, in fact, caught in the superb details of

deserts, forests and plateaus, their denizens and plants; it is all a far cry from the original musty cases of stuffed birds and beasts. Today's installations dramatize science through art: the dioramas are skillful stage sets and the Hall of Gems rivals Cartier's. The seasons are constantly celebrated in the starry skies of the Hayden Planetarium.

The museum's structures are as marvelous and motley as its collections. It took 22 buildings to house the more than one million insects, 750,000 birds and 700,000 fossil invertebrates counted by the W.P.A. in 1939, and the collections have been growing ever since. The museum represents not just a century of pleasure but a century of scholarship that has expanded the knowledge of the natural world. For all of us, it has been a place of instruction, enchantment and awe.

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