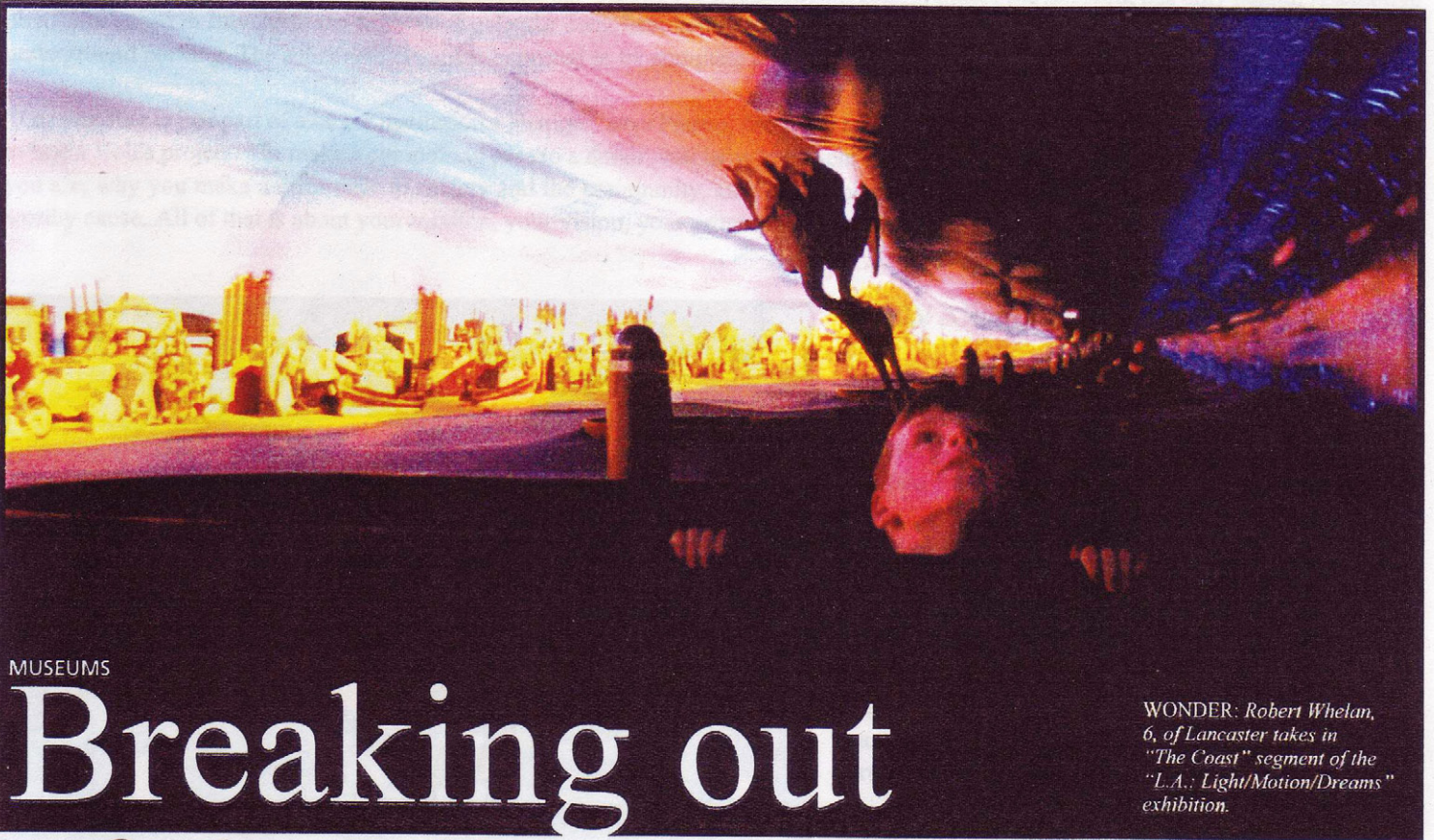


October 31, 2004

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MUSEUMS

Breaking out of the diorama

WONDER: Robert Whelan, 6, of Lancaster takes in "The Coast" segment of the "L.A.: Light/Motion/Dreams" exhibition.

Can the Natural History Museum help save itself – and the environment – by focusing on today?

By SUZANNE MUCHNIC
Times Staff Writer

Photographs by RICHARD HARTOG
Los Angeles Times

WITH 90 years under its belt and 33 million objects in its pockets, the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County is a fixture of Exposition Park. It's where schoolkids go to see dinosaur skeletons, dioramas of African and American mammals, an insect zoo and California gold. It's Los Angeles' closet, a conglomeration of specimens and artifacts stuffed into a 1913 Beaux Arts palace with a batch of mismatched additions.

But fixtures wear out, and this one is struggling to revitalize itself with a fresh image and a \$300-million expansion plan. It's as if the museum is saying, "Hey, what about me?" to a constituency that has either forgotten it or taken it for granted.

"Los Angeles has the raw ingredients to have a world-class natural history museum," says Jane Pisano, the museum's president and director, who took charge three years ago. "It could be a jewel in the crown of the city, just like the American Museum of Natural History in New York and the Field Museum in Chicago."

In the United States, the Los Angeles museum's collection is topped only by the 124-million-piece cache at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Natural History in Washington, D.C. The American Museum has 30 million specimens and artifacts; the Field has 22 million. But the L.A. museum's \$27-million annual operating budget and 410,000-square-foot building don't measure up to those of its peers. Annual attendance, about 1 million, has more than doubled during Pisano's tenure but still lags far behind the National's 6.5 million, the American's 3 million and the Field's 2 million.

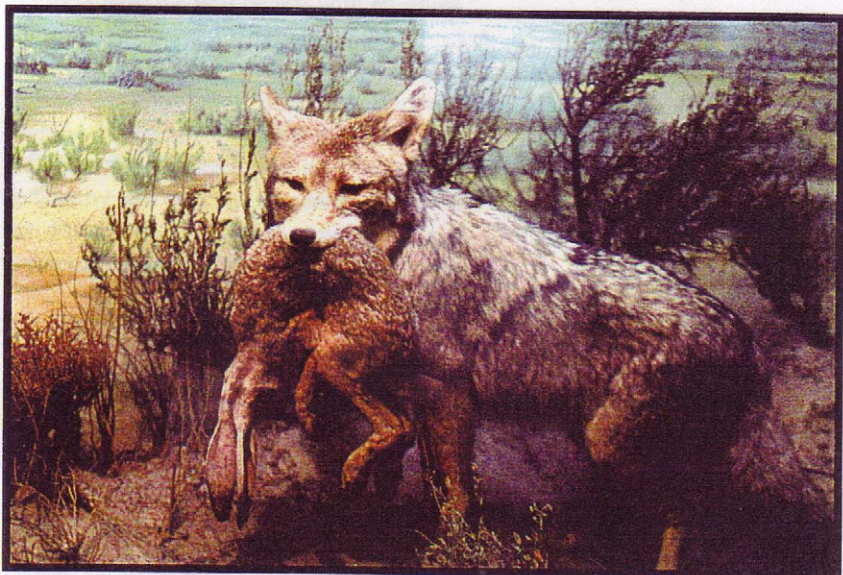
Reimagining the museum

That's not the way things should be, says Pisano, who is overseeing a transformation of the museum's programs and facilities. The curatorial staff has spearheaded a new look in exhibitions, in sync with a nationwide effort to make natural history more relevant to a broader public by focusing on ecological and environmental issues. And a fully funded, \$13.5-million restoration of the building's historic core is about to begin. But fundraising for a major renovation and expansion, designed by New York architect Steven Holl, has only begun. A tentative plan, announced in July 2002 and in process, calls for demolishing post-1920s additions to the building and constructing a new wing with underground parking. The schematic design is expected to be complete early next year.

"The building is just part of a larger institutional change," says Pisano, declining to speculate about when all the money might be in place to begin Holl's project. "To make a compelling case to a donor, you have to present more than a building plan. You have to talk about who you are, why you make a difference to society and the community, and why someone should contribute to you as opposed to any other worthy cause. All of that is about your mission, your vision, your programs. We are on track with that."



'THE FOOTHILLS': In this diorama, a coyote holding his dinner—a pet cat—illustrates the confrontation between man and nature.



COUNTRY COUSIN: In a more traditional diorama presenting the natural order of life and death in the wild, another coyote returns to its lair in the Owens Valley bearing a jack rabbit.

NEW ASPIRATIONS

Just how hard it is to rally financial support for an old institution with new ideas remains to be seen. But the museum's changing aspirations are already on view—in two stuffed coyotes.

One of these beasts is a minor character in a cavernous hall of dioramas that has presented taxidermic mammals in their natural habitats for the past 70 years. This coyote has returned to his lair in the Owens Valley to feed his family, with a limp jack rabbit in his mouth. The classic diorama presents the natural order of life and death in the wild, in a glass-covered scene that resembles a traditional painting.

The other coyote is a nighttime urban raider who plays a provocative role in "L.A.: Light/Motion/Dreams," an up-to-the-minute, multimedia exhibition with a \$1.3-million budget. He also holds his dinner by the back of the neck, but it's somebody's pet cat. Standing on a real diving board over a simulated backyard swimming pool, the coyote stares at the adjoining house. With no glass barrier holding them back, visitors walk right into a confrontation between man and nature, and it isn't a pretty picture.

The message is subtler in another section of the show, where videotaped footage of L.A.'s nature and culture, projected on mirrors, allows viewers to ponder the environmental impact of urban sprawl while enjoying a kaleidoscopic spectacle. But just around the corner is a stuffed raccoon in a trash can. Farther along, a replicated section of the Los Angeles River makes pointed comparisons between the sylvan past and the concrete-walled, graffiti-covered present.

Is this any way to run a natural history museum? Pisano thinks so.

"Our purpose is not only to be a repository where people can observe and learn," she says, "but to present our collections in ways that inspire people to take responsibility. If we do our job right, we are going to sensitize people to the importance of their nature and their culture in a way that will make them better citizens."

"L.A.: Light/Motion/Dreams" is a landmark event at the museum, designed to illuminate its new, activist mission — "to inspire wonder, discovery and responsibility for our natural and cultural worlds." Combining 400 objects from the collection with photographs, film, video, sound and specially commissioned artworks, it provides a sharp contrast to the conventional displays.

Vanda Vitali, vice president of public programs, says the exhibition represents a fundamental shift of perspective, from the past to the present and future.

The focus on environmental stewardship reflects a national trend. While continuing to collect, conserve, study and exhibit specimens of anthropology, biology and mineral science — as they have for the past century — natural history museums are putting increasing emphasis on conservation at home and abroad.

"We have studied the environment since our founding in 1893," says John W. McCarter, president and chief executive of the Field Museum, "but the nature of the work has changed in that we have become much more active. We have become advocates."

Why?

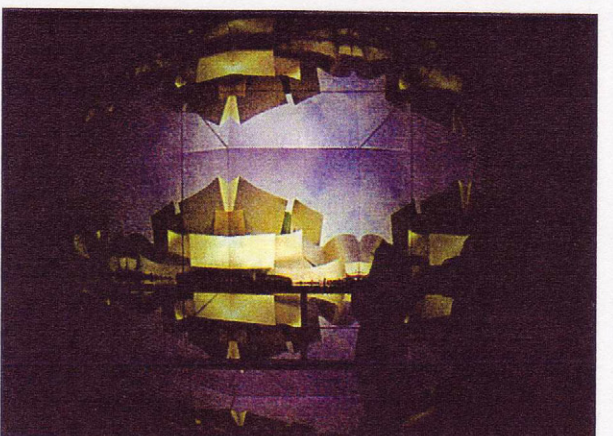
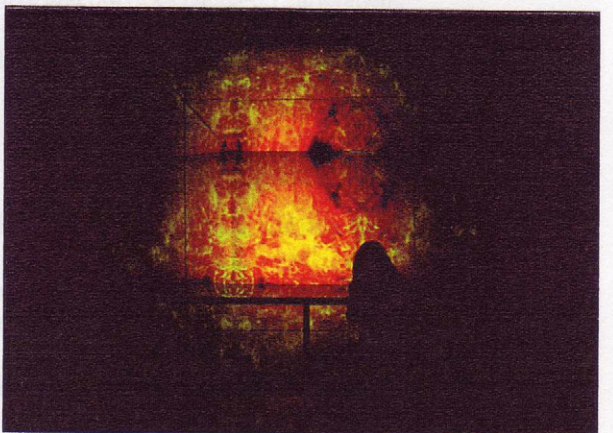
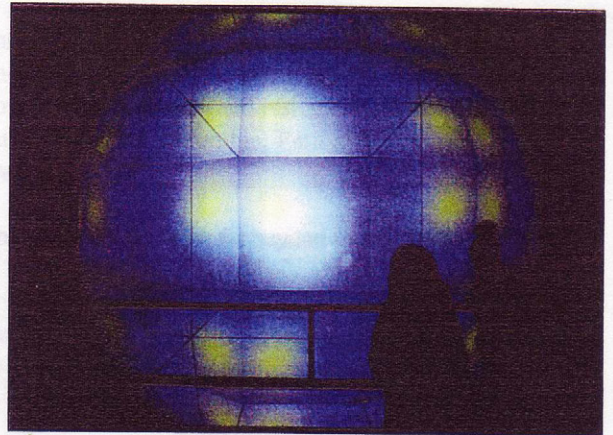
"We as a species, *Homo sapiens*, are causing an environmental cataclysm," McCarter says. "It's so enormous that the responsibility of great natural history museums to record the diversity of life and then to protect areas that are threatened is global." The need outstrips financial resources, but museums must do what they can, he says.

"We are the natural organizations to be engaged in environmental education and research," says Michael W. Hager, executive director of the San Diego Natural History Museum. "Our environment is under assault. If we don't address that, we will be left with eulogies."

Many mission statements have been rewritten during the last decade or so to reflect that conviction. The Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History aims to inspire "abiding respect for the natural world." The mission of the Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia declares its intent "to create the basis for a healthy and sustainable planet." The Carnegie Museum of Natural History in Pittsburgh "conducts scientific inquiry that creates knowledge and promotes stewardship of Earth and its life."

OUTREACH PROJECTS

Curators do their part by organizing exhibitions that encourage environmental awareness. "Frogs," a current show featuring 200 live amphibians at the American Museum in New York, offers information about human activity that has decimated frog populations and destroyed their habitats. "Earth, Wind & Wildfire," opening in October at the San Diego museum, will launch a series on the coexistence of people and powerful forces of nature. "Living Downstream," a permanent installation at Philadelphia's Academy, demonstrates how people's actions affect water quality and what they can do to help the aquatic environment.



KALEIDOSCOPIC: "L.A.: Light / Motion / Dreams" visitors see videotaped footage of nature and culture, projected on mirrors on a huge globe, allowing them to ponder the environmental impact of urban sprawl. The constantly shifting colors and forms are all taken from the Los Angeles area.