

Diorama-rama: History Behind Glass

In his photographs, Hiroshi Sugimoto captures the tension between real and fake that makes dioramas so intriguing

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Wapiti, 1980, Hiroshi Sugimoto. Gelatin silver print, 13 3/4 x 23 1/8 in.
Getty Museum, 2013.36.1. Purchased with funds provided by the
Photographs Council. © Hiroshi Sugimoto

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When you hear the word “diorama,” you might think of your 4th-grade project made from an old shoebox. You know, the one with cute little palm trees and tiny dinosaurs made of clay? The purpose of the modern diorama is to educate kids and adults alike about global flora and fauna, cultural scenes, or historical events.

We continue to be fascinated by these simple scene-setters, but why? What interests us in an inanimate elk or giraffe stuck in time? To answer that question, I looked at the history of the diorama as well as the contemporary photographs of Hiroshi Sugimoto, now on view at the Getty Center.

Dioramas were a bit different when first introduced. The inventor of the diorama was Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre, creator of the first widely used method of photography, the daguerreotype. Among his many talents was theatrical set design, and in 1822 he created multi-layered landscape paintings that would change in appearance through illumination, screens, shutters, and color blinds. Hundreds of patrons would sit in a highly specialized theater set on a massive turntable, which would move from one landscape painting to the next.

Daguerre's rich and realistic paintings, paired with visual tricks, almost fooled the audience into believing they were looking at a dynamic, natural scene.



The Effect of Fog and Snow Seen through a Ruined Gothic Colonnade, 1826, Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre. Oil on canvas. Gerard Levy Collection. Reproduced in *Panoramania!* by Ralph Hyde (London: Trefoil Publications / Barbican Art Gallery 1988), catalog item No. 99 on p. 119, with color illustration on p. 168

Habitat dioramas as we know them today first became popular in natural history museums in the early 20th century. We've all admired the taxidermied beasts surrounded by a faithfully replicated natural environment. Recently dioramas have jumped outside the museum to invade pop culture, starring in countless movies, television shows, and commercials. Los Angeles's own Natural History Museum has an acclaimed collection of animal dioramas that recently had the limelight in an episode of *Mad Men* and a Ferris Bueller-themed Honda commercial.



Still from *Mad Men* episode filmed at the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County. Courtesy of AMC

But what is it about dioramas that's so compelling?

Arpad Kovacs, assistant curator of photographs at the Getty Museum and curator of the Sugimoto exhibition, gave me his theory on why dioramas are instant crowd-pleasers:

“I think dioramas continue to fascinate museum visitors because they are at once familiar and strange. They present opportunities for close examination of specific natural scenes, making them excellent educational tools. However, the arrangement of the taxidermied figures, the meticulously painted backgrounds, and the careful lighting also reinforce a feeling of spectacle. These components make dioramas engaging and entertaining.”



Sable Antelope, 1994, Hiroshi Sugimoto. Gelatin silver print, 16 11/16 x 21 5/16 in. Getty Museum, 2013.36.4. Purchased with funds provided by the Photographs Council. © Hiroshi Sugimoto

Dioramas can also have a second life in the hands of an artist. Hiroshi Sugimoto used his skill and patience as a photographer to turn static dioramas at New York’s Natural History Museum into spectacular, realistic scenes. [Sugimoto talks about his approach on his website:](#)

“Upon first arriving in New York in 1974, I did the tourist thing. Eventually I visited the Natural History Museum, where I made a curious discovery: the stuffed animals positioned before painted backdrops looked utterly fake, yet by taking a quick peek with one eye closed, all perspective vanished, and suddenly they looked very real. I’d found a way to see the world as a camera does. However fake the subject, once photographed, it’s as good as real.”

By omitting the text surrounding each display, Sugimoto’s work heightens the illusion that the animals were photographed in their natural habitats. Polar bears, manatees, and other wildlife look like they are breathing, moving animals, rather than stuffed behind glass. “Sugimoto doesn’t necessarily aim to elevate the diorama tradition,” Arpad told me. “Instead he’s more interested in photography’s ability to transform something as artificial as the diorama into a convincing view of a real scene in nature.”



Polar Bear, 1976, Hiroshi Sugimoto. Gelatin silver print, 16 9/16 x 21 1/2 in.
Getty Museum, 2013.36.5. Purchased with funds provided by the
Photographs Council. © Hiroshi Sugimoto

The tension between real and fake, between education and spectacle, between death and life, makes dioramas endlessly fascinating. They let us experience a moment in time again and again, down to the last, sometimes bloody, detail. ■

Photographs

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