

Museums with moxie: Philadelphia's curious collections

by Fyllis Hockman

Sure, there's something to be said for touring Independence Hall, viewing the Liberty Bell, gorging at the open-air Italian Market, the last of its kind in the country, and taking in other historical attractions during a trip to Philadelphia. But the real finds are the many lesser-known museums that not only interest and educate but often amuse visitors to the City of Brotherly Love.

MUTTER MUSEUM - The vast medical exhibit at Mutter Museum—The College of Physicians of Philadelphia was established to serve as a teaching tool. CNS Photo courtesy of T. O'Keefe for GPTMC. Whether you have some time to kill between business appointments, enjoy offbeat sightseeing or actually have a special interest in this stuff, consider checking out collections that range from penitentiaries to podiatry, from Mummies to Mario Lanza.

It's probably wise not to visit the Mutter Museum on a full stomach. Among its prize exhibits are a tumor removed from President Grover Cleveland's jaw during a secret operation in 1893, a death cast of Siamese twins, brains and other specimens preserved in jars, and 139 skulls that illustrate variations among European ethnic groups.

The collection, at the College of Physicians of Philadelphia, was established to serve as a teaching tool. While medical students drop by to study the exhibits, boasting over 20,000 "disturbingly informative" objects, most tourists seek out abnormalities such as the skeleton of a 7-foot-6-inch giant (or basketball player) from Kentucky and the Parisian woman who had a 6-inch horn growing out of her forehead. Presumably the museum's name comes from all the people who leave, shaking their heads and muttering to themselves.

Another ingratiating medical option, Temple University's Dental Museum features the works of Edgar "Painless" Parker. The colorful dentist collected all the teeth he pulled at his chain of West Coast offices in the first half of the 20th century. A bucket containing them all -- thousands of them -- is only part of the Painless Parker display. Other mouthwatering memorabilia include dental torture devices (the PR department would probably take issue with that characterization) and related objects.

Two out-of-the-way Philly museums have musical connections. The Mario Lanza Museum, located on the first floor of the former rectory of the St. Mary Magdalen de Pazzi Church, is comprised of an almost shrinelike collection of movie posters, concert programs, photos, letters and other memorabilia of the native son who became one of the most beloved tenors of all time. So popular was the actor and singer that since his death in 1959 at age 38, a cult of admirers have kept his memory alive.

Music of a very different kind is the focus of the Mummies Museum, dedicated to the elaborately costumed participants in Philadelphia's annual New Year's Day parade. In a tradition that dates back to Colonial times, Mummies (a derivative of the German word *mumme*, meaning mask) spend a year making costumes to show off during the daylong extravaganza. The outlandishly colored feather- and sequin-bedecked creations, some weighing as much as 100 pounds, vie for prizes as the parade wends its way through the heart of the city. The Mummies celebrated their 105th anniversary on Jan. 1, 2006.

Exhibits trace the origins of Mummers to the 17th century. They include numerous award-winning costumes and air videos of past parades. Visitors also have an opportunity -- and who would want to miss it -- to learn the Mummers' "strut," the distinctive march-cum-dance step used during the annual festivities.

Anyone who marches in a daylong parade first should saunter over to the Shoe Museum at the Temple University School of Podiatric Medicine. Among some 800 diverse items are Egyptian burial sandals from the second century B.C., 3-inch-long shoes made for Chinese women with bound feet, Eskimo snowshoes and turn-of-the-century women's footwear with 6-inch heels (each one alone the size of two whole shoes from the Orient).

Displayed among shoes belonging to first ladies are Lady Bird Johnson's silk pumps, Nancy Reagan's rhinestone-adorned dress wear and Betty Ford's "sensible shoes." Celebrity footwear includes a lifeboat-size basketball sneaker filled up by Julius "Dr. J" Irving, boots that Sandy Duncan wore (flew in?) in the Broadway show "Peter Pan," and tune-tappin', beat-stompin' Beatle shoes sported by Ringo Starr. The Shoe Museum, a setting with sole, is open by appointment only.

Comfortable walking shoes are sure to come in handy during a tour of the Eastern State Penitentiary. Active from 1829 to 1971, the sprawling granite structure was designed by social reformers who believed the key to rehabilitation was a pleasant environment that isolated prisoners from each other. The building, now a National Historic Landmark, became the most influential prison in history, serving as the model for some 300 other penitentiaries around the world.

Eastern State was home to such notorious criminals as Al Capone, Willie Sutton and Pep, the cat-murdering canine. That errant dog's owner, a former Pennsylvania governor, commuted its death sentence to life imprisonment after the dog killed the feline companion of the governor's wife.

If those are not enough, other curious collections include the Garbage Disposal Collection, housed at Dave's Electric near Lehigh Avenue, which boasts the most complete (and I suspect, only) gathering of In-Sink-Erator garbage disposals in America; the Philadelphia Insectarium, crawling with 100,000 live roaches in a model kitchen, a hive of bees with access to the outdoors and many other creepy, crawly creatures hanging out at Steve's Wildlife and Pest Control at Frankford Avenue; and the Spiral Q Puppet Theater and Museum, with dozens of puppets from around the world onstage as well as on display -- a showy sightseeing stop with lots of strings attached.

And yes, there also are a large variety of art and other traditional exhibits in Philadelphia for those who prefer the more conventional museum route. But none of them include a garbage disposal!

IF YOU GO For more information about any of the museums, contact the Independence Visitor Center at 800-537-7676 or visit www.gophila.com.

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