Professor Rossi

Art, Craft, Science

Harvard Museum Reflections

After making my way through a bustling Harvard yard (armed with my Brass Rat, of course), I arrived at the Harvard Museum of Natural History, and first found myself in a large room replete with gems and minerals of every color, shape, and texture imaginable. I was initially drawn in by some impressive crystals that looked about as tall as me. These huge spikes, which I learned were Gypsum, were as long and thick as arms and legs, jutting out in all directions. Their unique configuration did the work of luring me into the exhibit, and as I stepped away from them I noticed the sheer variety of samples around me; in little cases up and down the room were every manner of mineral – round, sparkly clusters that almost looked like fuzzy little clouds, sharp, pointy crystals that resembled shards of glass, blocky, cube-like lattices, and everything in between. I found a docent, Eileen, and asked for her thoughts. She showed me one of her favorite items – a very large Amethyst geode in the center of the room that had been mined from Rio Grande do Sul in Brazil. We mused about how it could have been found, and whether reconstructive work was done after the fact to repair any bore holes made in its discovery. I realized that, up until that point, I had never considered the work that went into locating and excavating samples like this. I asked her about a large, shell-shaped gem at the back of the room that had been mesmerizing me from afar with its glossy, pearlescent sheen. Not knowing many details about the specimen (understandably, given the sheer quantity of gems in the room), she looked it up then and there, and we discovered that this beautiful sample, called an Ammolite, formed from a fossilized ammonite shell, giving it its characteristic shape. Apparently, this opal-like gemstone is one of only a few biogenic gemstones next to amber and pearl. Satisfied with my tour of the mineralogy collection, I asked Eileen for recommendations, and she raved about the glass flowers. I had not planned on visiting them, but at her urging, I decided to give them a try.

As I entered the room where the glass flowers were housed, I was immediately struck by the quiet and peace of the environment. Along with the dimmed lights, this made the room feel like it was in another word. There was an unmistakable air of careful reverence that suited the

medium of glass. I noticed glass cases containing what absolutely looked like real flowers that could have just been picked. I wanted to ask someone if they *really* were all glass. In fact, I heard some museum-goers near me arguing about just that – one unconvinced that every part of each flower was simply a glass fabrication, and the other (sort of pedantically) insisting that they were. A plaque in the room confirmed for me that, yes, every single specimen was all glass (with some internal wires for support). I marveled at the detail each piece contained. What felt like dozens (if not a hundred or more) flowers lined the walls, and each one captured the asymmetry and complexity characteristic of something *real*. Some of the glass plants even had jumbled roots at their bases as if they had been pulled from the ground. Clearly, the artists (Leopold and Rudolf Blaschka) were concerned with scientific accuracy, as many of the pieces even included close-up transverse and longitudinal cross sections of the flower's stem and other detailed depictions of the plant's anatomy, and even microscopic views of the cells, all crafted from glass. They were truly indistinguishable from organic plants. I even recognized some flowers that I was sure I had seen growing out in the world recently. One of my favorite parts of the collection was the central recreation of the Blaschkas' workstation, which was set up to appear as though the artists were mid-work. Metal tools like tweezers and tongs sat beside scattered glass rods of various bright colors and what appeared to be a heating apparatus. It invited me to give more consideration to the nature of the labor that went into this mesmerizing art.

I moved on to a tour of the exhibits you expect to see in a museum of natural history – everything from giant isopods in glass jars to dinosaur bones. I was keeping an eye out for taxidermy, as I had the "Teddy Bear Patriarchy" reading on my mind. I made my way through various interesting exhibits, but what really gave me pause was the vast collection of taxidermied mammals. I thought back to the accounts of Akeley and his obsession with preserving the natural marvel of, for example, gorillas by needlessly killing them. I wrote down the original description of this act as a "depraved and vicious beast killed in a heroic, dangerous encounter" in my notebook because the sheer twisting of the narrative stunned me. Having learned about evolution and studied primates such as these, I know all too well that they are just animals living their lives, existing within their social structures, and defending themselves and their territory. As I passed the bodies of dozens upon dozens of animals, both tiny and absolutely gargantuan, I reached the ape display. A chimpanzee, orangutan, gibbon, and yes, a gorilla, stood before me, frozen in place. I marveled in my notebook that, somehow, I could swear the chimp bore a sad

expression. My attention settled on the gorilla. I think this is something I have seen in museums before, but the reading made the past of this animal come to life for me. It held a pose of beating its chest, and as I looked into its eyes, it felt just a bit too close to being human. I thought back to the Rieppel reading, which, although it dealt mainly with the topic of dinosaurs, highlighted the lengths to which we go to make things entertaining. This gorilla now stands forever in a museum, for educational purposes, yes, but also for entertainment. His life was likely cut short just so that his body could be put on display for the smarter apes to gawk at or simply consider in passing. As I wrote in my notebook, "...this actually feels kinda wrong…".

21A.501J / STS.074J Art, Craft, Science
Fall 2024