

application of plastics technology tilted the balance of power in their favour in the latter stages of the Second World War. I also refer readers to Fenichell's discussion of Ezio Manzini, postwar Italy's philosopher of plastic, who, almost single-handedly, spawned the "Olivetti era." Having said this, I am baffled by one glaring oversight: Fenichell ignores the increasing use of plastics in today's aerospace industry, specifically in the design and construction of "stealth aircraft," a not insignificant omission.

The author has a great feel for his subject. Fenichell recognizes, and, even more importantly, he enables his readers to recognize that plastics are more than the product of careful science. In some cases, plastics have been developed to provide unique solutions to unique problems; but more often than not, they have been the unanticipated result of experiments gone awry. By way of example, after having accidentally left a beaker of isoprene in the sunlight, British chemist William Tilden managed to turn isoprene gum into a polymer. Fenichell also cites the case of two young organic chemists, E. W. Fawcett and R. O. Gibson, whose failed experiment yielded a waxy solid that would eventually lead to the discovery of vinyl. In these and other colourful examples, Fenichell shows that the objective world of science is loaded with personality. It is in his role as anecdotalist that the author's talents really shine.

During most of his narrative, Fenichell is able to attribute a specific discovery — or a significant development towards a discovery — to a specific scientist or inventor. In the early days of the evolution of polymers and plastics, there was clearly an intimate link between the material and an individual. Research committees and project teams within multinational corporations had not yet appeared on the scene. This is reflected in the straightforward and value-neutral titles of his first few chapters. It would seem that for Fenichell, the evolution of plastics started out as a very linear, albeit serendipitous, process — a progression from celluloid, to Bakelite, to cellophane, to nylon, and so on.

But somewhere along the way, the world of plastics loses its simplicity, its innocence, its controllability. Just past the mid-point of the book, the tenor of Fenichell's narrative changes. The evocative titles of his later chapters reflect this change: "Plast-O-Rama," "Pop Plastic," "The Seat of the Plague," and "Sympathy for the Devil." Without flinching, Fenichell assesses the cultural and environmental consequences of the pervasiveness of plastic in our everyday lives. It makes for a gripping read.

To my mind, the only major shortcoming of *Plastic: The Making of a Synthetic Century* is its lack of strong visuals. The scant few that exist only beg for more. Fenichell's central argument is that plastics moulded the twentieth century by the objects we moulded from plastic. So where are the images of these objects? One case in point: Fenichell goes to great lengths to explain John Wesley Hyatt's "stuffing machine." He describes cylinders, tapered nozzles, and an oil-filtered jacket. An illustration would have greatly enhanced the readers' understanding of this ground-breaking product. Another early example is Bakelite. Given the visual potency that Bakelite handed over to the designers and manufacturers of the day, where are the illustrations of the products that would go on to shape our new aesthetic? And later, given the importance of the work of Charles Eames and Eero Saarinen, where are the illustrations of their designs? The list goes on.

Plastic: The Making of a Synthetic Century falls somewhere between two extremes: Ronald Beck's *Plastic Product Design* (1970), a technical textbook used in the teaching of plastics technology, and Sylvia Katz's *Plastics: Designs and Materials* (1978), one of the better illustrated histories of plastic. Somehow, authors who approach this complex topic seem to be stuck in a mindset that stipulates that a book about plastic must either be word-bound and therefore meant for the classroom, or picture-bound and therefore meant for the coffee table. With more visuals, *Plastic: The Making of a Synthetic Century* could have been a real breakthrough.

Lawrence Weschler, *Mr. Wilson's Cabinet of Curiosities*

ROBIN INGLIS

Weschler, Lawrence. *Mr. Wilson's Cabinet of Curiosities*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1995. 165 pp., 43 illus., cloth, \$28.95, ISBN 0-679-43998-6.

This delightful little book describes American journalist Lawrence Weschler's discovery of a nondescript, 1500-square-foot, storefront operation in Los Angeles — the Museum of

Jurassic Technology. Through this discovery he uncovers the beginnings of the modern museum in the eclectic, confused and confusing cabinets of curiosities of post-Renaissance Europe, before the Age of Reason introduced us to the 'modern' systematic documentation of knowledge.

The Museum of Jurassic Technology grew out of the prodigious and unusual imagination of David Wilson, former avant-garde filmmaker and student of urban entomology, possessed of a real skill in the creation and building of off-beat exhibits. "Jurassic Technology"? What on earth does that mean? The "General Statement" of the museum is perhaps less than helpful, describing the MJT as:

an educational institution dedicated to the advancement of knowledge and the public appreciation of the Lower Jurassic. Like a coat of two colors, the Museum serves dual functions. On the one hand the Museum provides the academic community with a specialized repository of relics and artifacts from the Lower Jurassic, with an emphasis on those that demonstrate unusual or curious technological qualities. On the other hand the Museum serves the general public by providing the visitor a hands-on experience of "life in the Jurassic."

It continues:

although the path has not always been smooth, over the years the Museum of Jurassic Technology has adapted and evolved until today it stands in a unique position among the major institutions of the country. Still, even today, the Museum preserves something of the flavor of its roots in the early days of the natural history museum — a flavor which has been described as "incongruity born of the overzealous spirit in the face of unfathomable phenomena."

What? Still confusing!

In the first part of the book Weschler leads us into the museum and into the imagination of David Wilson. It is an adventure. In the words of the critic Ralph Rugoff, "it is dark and claustrophobic enough to evoke the kinship between museum and mausoleum. The MJT is a curiosity collection-cum-natural history museum, where science and art, as well as history and fiction, are so fluidly conflated that all distinctions seem suspect." The author describes exhibitions on the Cameroon stink ant; a dramatic intersection of the lives of an opera star and a neurophysicist and memory researcher; bat research in South America; and "Letters to the Mount Wilson Observatory" in Pasadena, California. In what poses as a Gift Shop

he finds a series of booklets published in the United States by "the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Information ... in co-operation with the Visitors to the Museum by the Delegates of the Press." This Press has offices in locations as diverse as Billings, Bogota, Bhopal, Düsseldorf, Pretoria and Teheran.

"Excuse me," he ends up asking Wilson, "Um, what kind of place is this?" A precise answer is never forthcoming and later, when he follows up some of the stories presented with his own investigations, he discovers a curious mix of truth and fiction, imagination and fantasy. It turns out that Mr. Wilson's Cabinet, with interests that encompass all of time and space — ancient (jurassic) and modern (technology) — is a hall of mirrors. The Museum presents all the familiar museological conventions and techniques, and the exhibits seem to have all the authority we have come to take for granted. Beneath the surface, however, lies a complex play on that dynamic between the mystery and anarchy of individual inspiration, and the certainty and order of collective scholarship — contradictory forces that lie at the heart of the human condition. What Wilson has done is blur the now rigid line between truth and fiction. As any good novelist will tell you, fiction is not a lie; it is merely an approach to truth that can only be reached obliquely. And we only have to think about what today we know about memory to understand that no two people remember any event *exactly* the same way; memory is in fact an interlocking of precise recall and embellishment.

So what does this mean to museums today? Surely we wouldn't want to halt our upward march in the search for knowledge and the dissemination of "truth"? The answer, Weschler thinks, perhaps lies in the experience of "wonder." In his title the author uses this word and in the second half of the book he entertainingly recounts the stories of some of the more famous "catholic and deliriously heterodox" collections that sprouted up all over Europe following the two great waves of European discovery of the world in the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. What these collections did, of course, was to transport their viewers through a state of curiosity into a state of wonder, even disbelief. Weschler quotes Bernal Diaz's account of the Spaniard's first spellbound vision of the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan — "Gazing on such a wonderful sight, we did not know what to say or whether what appeared before us was real"; also the Italian art historian Adalgisa Lugli, who has written that, until the end of the eighteenth

century, wonder was "a form of learning — an intermediate, highly particular state akin to a sort of suspension of the mind between ignorance and enlightenment that marks the end of unknowing and the beginning of knowing;" and the American writer, Stephen Greenblatt, "the expression of wonder stands for all that cannot be understood, that can scarcely be believed. It calls attention to the problem of credibility and at the same time insists upon the undeniability, the exigency of experience."

We can be justly proud today of the way in which we have developed and conserved our museum collections, and of our organization of knowledge into highly useful and worthwhile exhibits that use those objects of material culture and the natural world that make up what we appreciate today as art, history and science. What David Wilson's particular museum provides us, however, is the chance, in his own words, "to reintegrate people to wonder." Through remarkable displays on horned humans; the curative powers of urine, duck's breath and mice on toast, fur and all; fruitstone carving; bees who are

understood "to be quiet and sober beings that disapprove of lying and cheating ... dislike bad language and should never be bought and sold;" and the Thums, father and son, whose collections form the basis of the MJT and whose story bears a bizarre similarity to that of the Tradescants, Wilson's creation reminds us of that marvellous human capacity for astonishment and absorption out of which all true creativity arises.

Today's museums are part of a world buried in knowledge. As the critic Reid Sherline has put it in his review of the MJT on the World Wide Web (<http://www.voyagerco.com/links/archive/links960318.html>; see also www.mjt.org): "Mystery under our care has atrophied, has grown delicate and consumptive. Wilson, in his small way, offers an antidote; with him we take our first, tentative steps back from knowing to unknowing." Lawrence Weschler, in this gem of a book — an easy and stimulating evening read — suggests that, in all our certainty and authority, we not forget our roots in the *wunderkammern* — the "wonder cabinets" of a couple or more centuries ago.

Ralph S. Hattox, *Coffee and Coffeeshouses: The Origins of a Social Beverage in the Medieval Near East*

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Hattox, Ralph S. *Coffee and Coffeeshouses: The Origins of a Social Beverage in the Medieval Near East*. Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1985. xii + 178 pp., 16 illus, paper, US\$14.95, ISBN 0-295-96231-3.

The extraordinary truth is that, compared to thousands of years for the drinking of beer or wine, coffee drinking is a relatively new habit, with less than five centuries of history. We are given the facts to substantiate this case, along with an explanation of why some of the universally told stories like the one about the goat nibbling berries and getting frisky are apocryphal, in Ralph Hattox's 1985 book *Coffee and Coffeeshouses: The Origins of a Social Beverage in the Medieval Near East*. It is a serious treatise, which presents a thorough critique of sixteenth-century Arab writers who published discourses on the history of the subject.

The interest of these writers, as Hattox's, revolves around the religious acceptability of coffee drinking. The introduction of the habit

prompted conservatives to question its legality in religious law, seemingly based on the fact that it was something new and therefore wrong. We hear of fatwahas issued condemning the consumption of coffee. How can one explain that the power of these edicts did not last? One should remember that a fatwah is not a formal edict of the state. It is an opinion. The state may choose to act upon it, of course.

In order to help us understand the different reasons for opposition to the practice, Hattox goes into great detail about the definitions of intoxication and stimulation through substance use that one can extract from the richly poetic, but sometimes confusing language of the Koran. If Hattox had limited himself to these kinds of legalistic theorizing, he might have lost most of our attentions. But by exploring possible political motivations for opposition to the habit, such as by city administrators concerned about unseemly behaviour in coffeeshouses that looked too much like taverns, we have a lively sense of the social setting in which all of this