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SECRETS OF THE MILWAUKEE PUBLIC MUSEUM



Lucky me! For this article, I get to see collections most visitors to the Milwaukee Public Museum (MPM) never view. Too vulnerable or precious to be exhibited, these objects are being conserved in controlled conditions behind the scenes. Right this way for a sampling of my tour:

The Basement: Woolly Mammoth Bones

"We have the real critter down here," says Carter Lupton, curator of anthropology, as we descend to the basement to see the bones of the Hebior Woolly Mammoth, discovered on a farm near Kenosha in 1994. "It's a really important specimen because it has butchering marks and it's 85%-95% complete—pretty rare for any fossil."

The 14,500-year-old bones—one of the most complete mammoth skeletons in North America—were acquired by MPM in 2007, thanks to local donors. A reproduction of the skeleton towers over the museum's lobby.

Lupton opens a drawer. I'm amazed. Large dun-colored joints point upward. "These, of course, are the vertebrae," he says. "And there's a tusk," he adds, pointing to an enormous swaddled object lying on a table." It's never been

unwrapped from its protective casing."

"Ribs," Lupton continues, opening a large box. There they lie in perfect symmetry. His curatorial pride grows: "You can see where the ribs attach, where the extra cartilage connects at the front," he says. "They're perfectly preserved."

In another box are four molars. Lifting out two large yellowed objects resembling huge hooves, Lupton says, "These are the grinding teeth—mammoths were grazers, grass-eaters." The bottoms of the teeth have swirly patterns like some deep-sea coral. Fascinating.

Fifth Floor: Moths and Butterflies

Lepidoptera curator Sue Borkin shows me brilliant azure butterflies ("Morpho") from Central and South America, "gynandrous" moths (half-female, half-male) and "hawk moths" that mimic plump bumblebees.

About 220,000 moths and butterflies (including Wisconsin examples dating from the 1890s—rare for a natural science museum) are stored in closed cabinets. Airtight drawers protect them from light, changing temperatures and the dreaded Dermestid beetle that can turn specimens to dust.

Sixth Floor: Reptiles and Amphibians

Ellen Censky, dean of collections, research and curatorial, guides me past jar after gallon-sized jar of alcohol-bathed brownish green contents. A whiff of high school biology class is in the air. One jar holds a curious soup of small snakes, lizards, frogs, salamanders and turtles. The department's 40,000 specimens, many from late-1800s Wisconsin, tell researchers the distribution of a species in a specific place through time.

"What has occurred in the past, what is not occurring at the moment," Censky says. This includes which species have invaded and which have disappeared.

Ground Floor: Extinct Birds

In a room lined by metal cupboards, the first drawer Censky opens startles me: It contains rows of yellow- and green-feathered bodies. Respectfully, Censky lifts one up. "Carolina parakeets," she says. Once native to the Southeast, they migrated northward in summertime. "If these samples hadn't been preserved,

one wouldn't think we had Carolina parakeets this far north," she says. Old-fashioned script on a faded tag reads "Waukesha 1844."

Another drawer reveals a lifelike specimen, gray with a long tail and pinkish breast feathers. "Passenger pigeon," Censky says. "Collected in 1893 in Pewaukee." My heart aches. I've heard about these birds that traveled in huge flocks sometimes a mile wide. Massive slaughter (their meat was used to feed slaves and the poor) decimated their numbers until the last wild specimen was shot in 1900. Censky holds a small box cradling three eggs.

A Great Auk and two ivory-billed woodpeckers also populate these drawers. "These species are no longer in existence anywhere. Done. Extinct," she says. "Sometimes people ask if scientific collecting contributes to extinction." Her calm voice intensifies. "No. Collectors for scientific research help preserve species; they create the baseline of data."

Bottom Line

Some 4.5 million objects are owned by MPM. Less than 1% is on exhibit—a percentage not uncommon for natural history museums. This ratio, when revealed, can trigger questions about why so few objects are displayed. Censky explains that some are duplicates, some are on loan and some are being studied. She notes that, in addition to exhibiting, MPM must be custodians for the future—including future researchers.

Budgetary problems have undoubtedly affected MPM. In the late 1980s, 27 curators were on staff. As of June, there are seven. Some activities are on hold; some staff is furloughed. The museum is exploring new ways to share its stored treasures: virtual exhibits on its website, limited tours, possibly mummy holograms for the revamped "Temples, Tells and Tombs" exhibit. Meanwhile, curators conserve both permanent exhibits and stored objects with enormous dedication.

"The great thing about the collections here is that they go back so far. They are just a phenomenal resource for us and for future generations," Censky says.

photograph courtesy of Shepherd Express