

From:
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CHAPTER 24: POTLATCH AND PURITY

At that time Chief Wiah had built an enormous house, generally referred to as Monster House, which was more than sixty feet wide and had nine large totem poles. When Chief Edenshaw came to Masset in the 1870s, he brought with him a totem pole that belonged to his ancestors. He carried the pole into Monster House. First he danced before it. Then he had it burned.

— *American Museum of Natural History:
125 Years of Expedition and Discovery*

THE DINOSAUR WAS FROM THE FIRST a pure, free, no-strings-attached gift to the American public, typically from a wealthy individual. In the first part of the twentieth century, the monumental reconstructions of bones and the painted or sculpted restorations in U.S. natural history museums were generally financed by private philanthropy, rarely by public revenues. There is a purely practical explanation for this fact: vertebrate paleontology was not widely regarded as a high priority for public investment in the United States in the late nineteenth century. Most research and educational institutions were turning their attention to experimental biology of the sort that could lead to practical results in the breeding of animals and plants. (The story of *Jurassic Park* unites experimental and evolutionary biology in its fantasy of cloning extinct species from DNA traces.) In 1900, however, actual living things and real wealth came first, extinct creatures and theoretical speculation a distant second. Giant skeletons and “birds with teeth” might be important in debates among the Darwinians, but it was easy for elected officials, sensitive to religious and practical objections, to find other priorities. If it were not for the generosity of J. P. Morgan, George Peabody, Marshall Field, and Andrew Carnegie, the great halls filled with monster skeletons in New York, New Haven, Chicago, and Pittsburgh would not exist.

Other than being grateful for these wondrous gifts, what are we to make of them? The anthropologist Marcel Mauss notes that in traditional cultures, rituals of gift-giving are essential to social solidarity.¹ The gift in these societies is never “free” or “pure,” but is always given with the expectation of some return, and the failure to reciprocate (or the refusal to accept) a gift is an insult that can lead to war. Rituals of exchange, called “potlatch” (meaning “to feed” or “consume”) among the Indians of America’s Pacific Northwest, are central to the social order. *The Encyclopedia of Religion* summarizes their function as follows:

Potlatches maintain social equilibrium, consolidate chiefly power over commoners, provide for the orderly transfer of wealth and power, provide a measure of group identity and solidarity, redistribute surplus wealth, level economic imbalances, provide outlets for competition without recourse to violence, and provide an occasion for aesthetic expression and dramatic entertainment.²

The potlatch at Chief Wiah’s “Monster House” is an extreme example of this practice that involves the destruction of a valuable object (the burning of a totem pole) as a gift to the gods — a gift that is understood as reciprocation for gifts that the gods have



Field Museum's John McCarter (from left) and Peter Crane meet with art dealer Richard Gray beside the skull of the "T-rex named Sue," purchased by the Field for the record sum of 8.8 million dollars in the fall of 1997. Mr. Gray's experience with high-stakes art auctions made him the ideal representative at the Sotheby's auction. The "war chest" to purchase Sue included a gift by the MacDonald's Corporation (which has a restaurant in the basement of the Field Museum) in exchange for the rights to reproduce Sue's image in certain selected venues. (AP/Wide World Photos, 1997.)

already given to a wealthy and powerful chief. The most grievous sin is meanness and miserliness, making an idol of wealth. Great gifts from the gods become a guilty burden if they are not reciprocated with some dramatic sacrifice of a valuable object — perhaps a totem or idol — in a public spectacle.

Modern rituals of gift-giving and philanthropy are generally contrasted with these archaic or "primitive" practices — what our uncomprehending racist vernacular calls "Indian giving." The modern gift is supposed to be pure and "free." Of course, we know that gifts are never free, that they confer obligations and imply reciprocity, but a crucial part of modernity — especially its economic mythologies — is the fiction that

some part of exchange lies outside financial interest, outside reciprocity and the expectation of rewards. The idea of the pure gift is a systematic disavowal of the everyday reality we all know, perhaps to compensate for the actual contamination of everyday modern life by the cash nexus.³

The dinosaur emerged as an ideal object of philanthropic giving at the end of the nineteenth century for many reasons. First, it was an exemplar of what Roosevelt called “science . . . followed purely for the sake of science.” Roosevelt had made it a principle that this sort of pure research had to be supported, partly because it might pay off “in the long run,” and partly because it seemed like a kind of moral corrective to the prevailing utilitarian and pragmatic character of American culture.⁴ Second, the dinosaur was a highly visible gift. Like Chief

Edenshaw’s totem pole, it was both monumental and monstrous, a surefire popular attraction. Third, this monstrous image came with associations of modernity and novelty (as a contribution to scientific progress and the filling in of the evolutionary record) as well as an aura of unimaginable antiquity. Fourth, the American dinosaur had inherited the role pioneered by Jefferson’s mastodon and could thus serve as an emblem of national pride. America’s big bones were a demonstration of its “natural constitution,” its virility, potency, and dominance in the Darwinian struggle among nations.

Above all, the dinosaur is an object that seems to lie outside both use value and exchange value. It is a kind of pure surplus or excess, what Thorstein Veblen called “conspicuous consumption” and “sumptuary display.”⁵ It is no accident that dinosaurs proliferate when there is an excess of capital to be expended, and tend to go out of style when times are hard. Unlike fossil fuels or valuable minerals, they do not have the obvious material and visual properties associated with value. They are, after all, merely old bones brought back to life by the miracle of modern science. They are the sacred animals of modernity, totems for the expenditure and purification of excess capital. Unlike valuable works of art, they are supposed to reside outside the realm of artifice, and to exemplify the deepest secrets of nature. And yet for the dinosaurologist or the dinomaniac, they also participate fully in the aura surrounding the traditional work of art, producing a synthesis of aesthetic, religious, and scientific wonder. Robert Bakker describes his experience of unearthing a bone with his chisel: “This bone is a holy relic for me, as beautiful in its roughly hewn outline as Michelangelo’s bound slaves struggling to keep themselves from the enveloping surface.”⁶

Man must have an idol – the amassing of wealth is one of the worst species of idolatry – no idol more debasing than the worship of money . . . therefore should I be careful to choose that life which will be the most elevating in its character. To continue much longer overwhelmed by business cares and with most of my thoughts wholly upon the way to make more money in the shortest time, must degrade me beyond hope of permanent recovery.

--Andrew Carnegie, *Diary*
(1868)

CHAPTER 25: DIPLODICUS CARNEGII

ANDREW CARNEGIE'S DINOSAUR *Diplodocus carnegii*, perfectly fulfilled all the functions of colossal philanthropy. As the story goes, Carnegie's first inspiration for his gift came in November 1898, when he read about a new dinosaur discovery in the New York papers and saw a pictorial "restoration" of the reported beast looking in the eleventh-story window of the New York Life Building. Carnegie immediately sent off a check for \$10,000 to the director of his newly founded Carnegie Institute with a note instructing him to "buy this for Pittsburgh."¹ Although the newspaper report turned out to be a hoax, Carnegie's money launched an aggressive program of big bone acquisition and lured some key bone hunters away from the American Museum. The *Diplodocus* was not long in arriving. "Dippy," as it was popularly named (the capacity for diminutive ridicule dogging the leviathan as always), rapidly became a gift that kept on giving. Replicas were sent as gifts to the crowned heads of Europe with the same theatrical magnanimity that had characterized the gift of the Jeffersonian mastodon. Carnegie could simultaneously present his gift as a symbol of national pride, as a conspicuous display of American wealth, bigness, and modernity, and as a personal display of his own power as one of the chief baronial figures in the new feudal order of the Gilded Age.

A crucial feature of the gift rituals analyzed by Mauss is the identification of the gift with the giver. Ideally, one doesn't give away a mere object, but something of oneself. Carnegie's dinosaur fit this ideal specification. It exemplified his longstanding commitment to the "survival of the fittest" version of social Darwinism popularized by his friend and intellectual adviser, Herbert Spencer. It also manifested the "bigger is better" philosophy of industrial integration that Carnegie pioneered in the steel industry, an association that was probably triggered by the juxtaposition of the dinosaur and the skyscraper. As if to confirm these identifications, the *Diplodocus* carries Carnegie's name: it is not only a gift given by him, but a Carnegie itself.

Unlike Chief Edenshaw, Carnegie did not dance in front of his *Diplodocus* and set it on fire. He was not, after all, giving this present to the gods, but to the public. Carnegie's public reputation in the nineties was at an all-time low in the wake of the notorious 1892 Homestead Strike, during which his absence — he was in Europe, pursuing "high culture" — gave his manager, Henry Frick, a free hand to destroy the steelworkers' union with the aid of Pinkerton thugs.² For years Carnegie had been seeking ways to retire from the "survival of the fittest" world in which he was so dominant and pursue a career of polite learning and philanthropy. But Carnegie's philanthropy was always on his own terms. He did not believe in giving to established charities, preferring to create his own symbolic outlets (education, museums, and "world peace" were the primary recipients). *Diplodocus carnegii* was the perfect symbolic gift to this public: the "most colossal animal ever on earth" exemplified the magnitude of the donor. It stood for Roosevelt's "science for its own sake," and of course it was radically distinct from that other (decadent) form of cultural "purity" that was available at the turn of the century, "art for art's sake." Its status as an extinct creature, a figure of massive power that had died and been restored to "life," placed it in a narrative cycle of destruction and resurrection at least as impressive as Chief Edenshaw's immolation of the


THE COLOSSAL ANIMAL EVER ON EARTH JUST FOUND OUT WEST

When It Walked the Earth Trembled Under Its Weight of 120,000 Pounds.

When It Ate It Filled a Stomach Large Enough to Hold Three Elephants.

When It Was Angry Its Terrible Roar Could Be Heard Ten Miles.

When It Stood Up Its Height Was Equal to Eleven Stories of a Sky-Scraper.

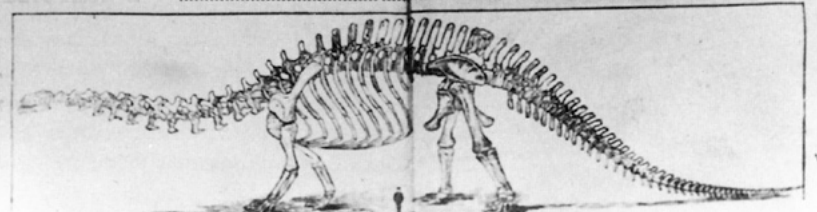


Footprints of the Brontosaurus a Yard Square Found in the Soil Back

Skull of the Bront in Wyoming

SCIENTIST'S CONCEPTION OF THE GIANTIC BRONTOSAURUS IN LIFE.

A ... **How the Brontosaurus Squatters Would Look if It Were Alive and Should Try to Peep Into the Eleventh Story of the New York Life Building.**

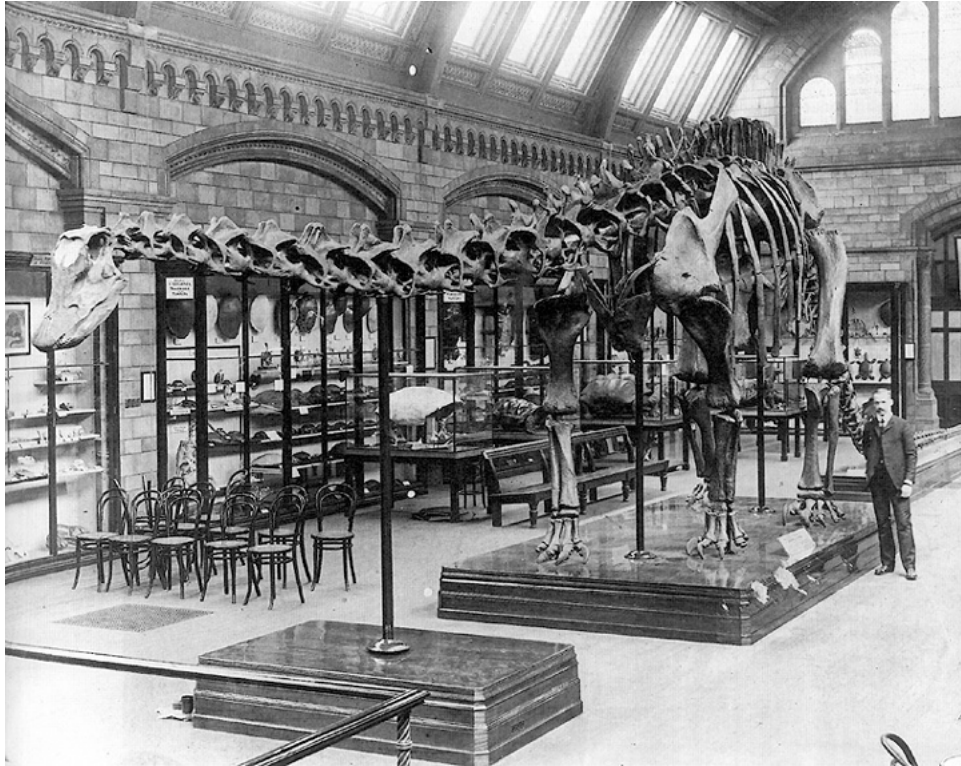


A Tail 40 Feet,
a Body 40 Feet,
a Neck 20 Feet,
and a Very Small Head

Dinosaurs invariably measure themselves against skyscrapers (see chapter 32). This is the dinosaur that, as legend has it, launched the Carnegie Museum of Natural History. When Andrew Carnegie saw this story (later revealed to be a hoax) on the front page of the New York Journal, he is reported to have said, "We have to have one of those for Pittsburgh." (Courtesy of Carnegie Museum of Natural History.)

totem pole, with its figures of ancestral animals. And when the dance was over, "Dippy" would still be there.

If every gift demands something in return, what did Carnegie expect in return for his *Diplodocus*? The simplest answer is: absolutely nothing. Any return gift by the public would have spoiled the whole effect. One of the key features of potlatch is its competitive character, the establishment of social hierarchy and chiefly status by an



The *Diplodocus carnegii*, the monumental figurehead of Andrew Carnegie's philanthropic efforts in natural history. This reconstruction was recast in numerous copies that were presented as gifts to the peoples of Germany, England, France, and Mexico, where they still stand in museums of natural history. (Photo of *Diplodocus carnegii* as it appeared in the Berlin Museum in 1908, courtesy of the Carnegie Museum of Natural History.)

overwhelming generosity that puts the recipient in an abject position of indebtedness. Mauss notes that in some aboriginal cultures, failure to reciprocate a gift puts the recipient in a position of slavery toward the donor. Carnegie didn't expect anything quite this dramatic (the shattered unions in his mills had left his workforce in a sufficiently abject condition of servitude). But he did clearly hope for gratitude, wonderment, and admiration. Perhaps a by-product of this gratitude would be public acceptance of the Carnegian philosophy as right and natural for America, and forgiveness of his shameful conduct during the Homestead Strike.

Outsize gifts always make the recipient feel uncomfortable and ambivalent: "it's too much," is the ritual protest. It seems safe to assume that the public was, as always, ambivalent about Carnegie's gift of big bones. *Diplodocus carnegii* no doubt served, and still serves, for the recitation of pieties about its beneficial effect on the public and as a stimulus for the unpredictable play of children's fantasies. As it happened, Dippy turned out to be something of a "transitional object" for Carnegie himself. In 1917, two years before his death, he decided to stop funding paleontological research, and the museum's scientific involvement with dinosaurology went into a long decline.

NOTES:

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

1. Marcel Mauss, *The Gift* (London: Routledge, 1954)
2. Stanley Walens, *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 11, s.v. "Potlatch," edited by Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillan, 1987), p. 465
3. See Jacques Derrida, *Given Time, I, Counterfeit Money*, translated by Peggy Kamuf (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), especially his commentary on Mauss and the relation between modern and traditional rituals of gift exchange.
4. *Roosevelt Cyclopedia*, 553.
5. See Veblen's classic, *Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Vanguard Press, 1912) for a discussion of the modern versions of potlatch in late-nineteenth-century America.
6. Robert Bakker, *The Dinosaur Heresies* (New York: William Morrow, 1986)

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

1. Helen J. McGinnis, *Carnegie's Dinosaurs* (Pittsburgh: Carnegie Institute, 1982), 13.
2. See Louis M. Hacker, *The World of Andrew Carnegie: 1865-1901* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1968), 383, on Carnegie as "an object of mingled pity and contempt" after the Homestead Strike.