

DINO MIGHT



THE REPRESENTATION OF DINOSAURS IN NATURAL
HISTORY MUSEUMS

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Sue on Display at the Field Museum, 5 December 2019, Wikimedia Commons, CC 4.0

SUE

Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago, Illinois

“SUE” is the largest and most complete T. Rex skeleton ever discovered, and is currently on display in the Field Museum (Field Museum 2018).

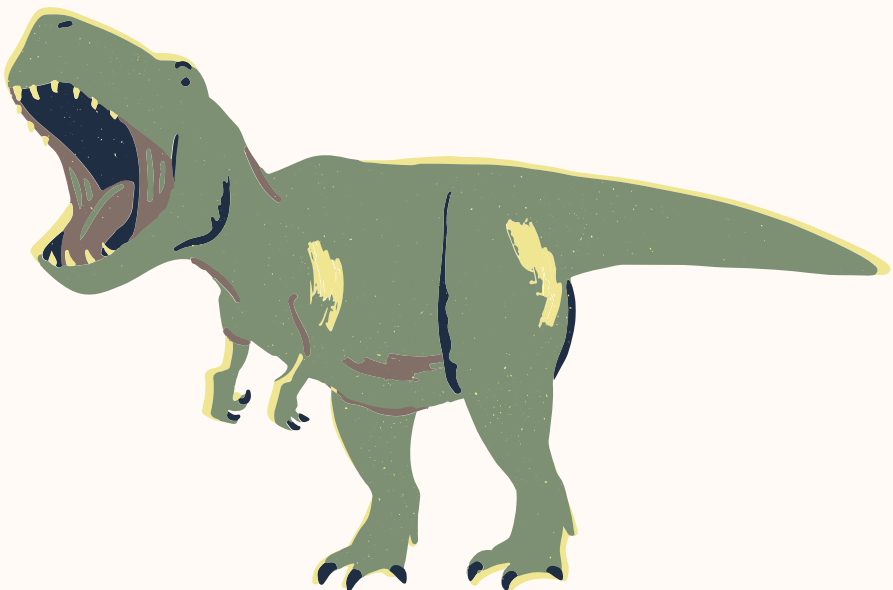
SUE’s actual sex is unknown. The skeleton was named after the person who discovered it, Sue Hendrickson. Interestingly, the Field Museum seems to use they/them pronouns for SUE in their article about them (Field Museum 2018).

The Field Museum, with support from McDonald’s, Walt Disney World, and unspecified private donors, bought SUE in 1997 at \$8.4 million, the most money ever paid for a fossil at auction (Field Museum 2018). The article claims that 12 museum preparators spent over 30,000 hours preparing SUE for display, and an additional 20,000 hours building SUE's exhibit (Field Museum 2018). The article on the museum’s website also talks about the skeleton traveling to international exhibitions and laboratories for further study (Field Museum 2018).

As seen in the provided photo, SUE's display is rather underwhelming when compared to their scientific importance and fame. The skeleton is displayed on a bare platform with nothing else on it, and is placed in a small corner rather than as a centerpiece of the museum. Sue is also portrayed in a simple walking pose.

The Field Museum also seems to treat SUE first and foremost as a status symbol or a mascot for entertainment before they discuss SUE's value as a scientifically important specimen or animal. The very first paragraph of their website's article about SUE states:

"You may know SUE as the hilarious, pun-loving dinosaur turning Twitter into a personal smorgasbord. Or you might treasure that selfie you snapped with this fearsome fossil looming overhead. But there's a lot more to SUE's story than 280 characters or a passing glance might offer" (Field Museum 2018).



“Big Al” is a remarkably complete and well-preserved allosaurus jimmadseni skeleton displayed in the University of Wyoming Geological Museum. Big Al is a subadult specimen showing multiple injuries to his ribs and feet, including a severe toe infection that likely led to his death (Bartlett 2000).

In the year 2000, a special episode of the BBC nature documentary series *Walking With Dinosaurs* dramatized the life of Big Al using CGI animation and animatronics. The documentary uses both scientific evidence and speculation surrounding the skeleton’s injuries to create a hypothetical biographical account of Big Al, from hatching to young adulthood (Bartlett 2000).

As seen in the photo below, the display itself is somewhat disappointing in comparison to the importance of the skeleton, and when compared to the documentary. Much like SUE, the platform is bare and plain, and the skeleton is articulated in a simple pose.

Big Al is also surrounded by other dinosaur skeletons in the exhibit hall, as seen in the photo on the museum's website article (UWGM n.d.), masking his importance further from uninformed viewers.

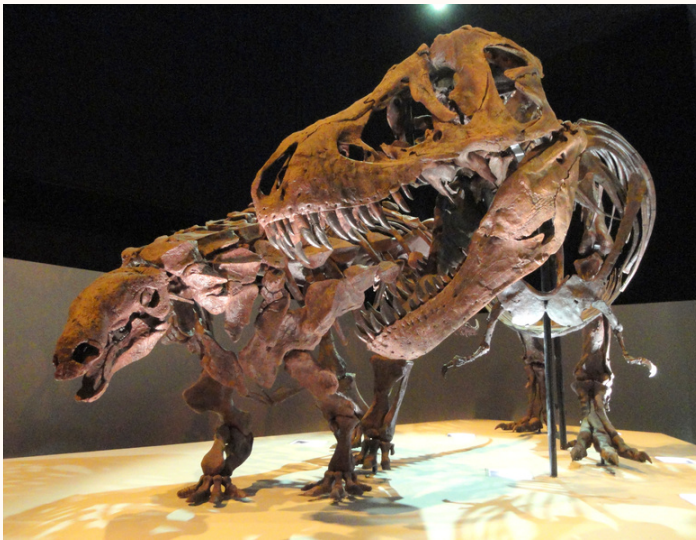


BIG AL

*University of Wisconsin
Geology Museum,
Madison, Wisconsin*

Big Al on Display at the UWGM, 8 July 2013, Wikimedia Commons, CC 2.0





Dinosaur Exhibit at the HMNS, 22 October 2012, Wikimedia Commons, CC 1.0 Public Domain

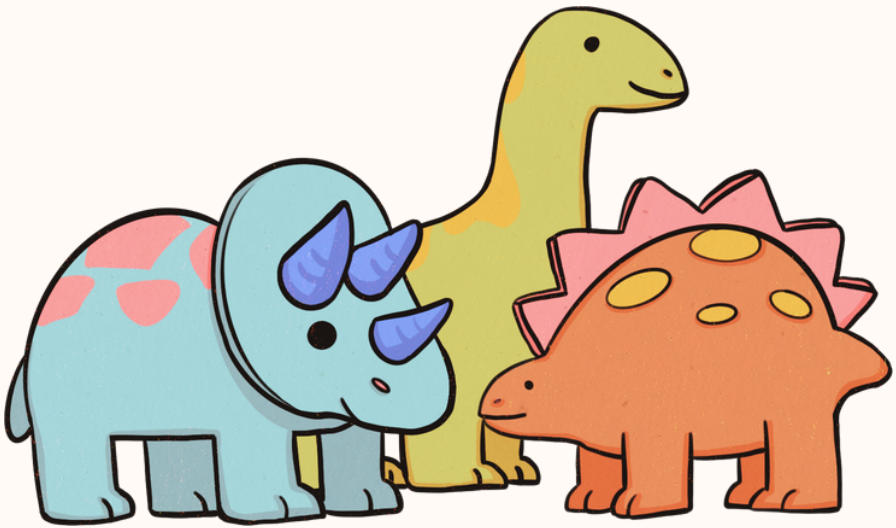
MORIAN HALL OF PALEONTOLOGY

Houston Museum of Natural Science, Houston, Texas

The Houston Museum of Natural Sciences' Morian Hall of Paleontology contains multiple dinosaur skeletons. The article on the museum's website states that the hall is:

“(...) packed with prehistoric beasts, and does not have the same stagnant displays of ancient skeletons standing in a row that many visitors are accustomed to seeing. Rather, the predators and prey in the new paleontology hall are in action – chasing, eating and escaping as they struggle for life” (HMNS n.d.)

The museum also debuted a “Holotheater” in November 2022, featuring a production about dinosaurs (HMNS n.d.). According to the museum's website, the theater features “stunning laser projection and three-dimensional holographic imagery,” and “two towering screens [that] join together to present larger-than-life depictions of the dinosaurs we know and love” (HMNS n.d.). HMNS president Joel Bartsch states in the same article, “we are all about that awe-inspiring, jaw-dropping moment” (HMNS n.d.). Notably, the dinosaur depicted on the website's banner advertising the Holotheater is portrayed with feathers (HMNS n.d.).



While the displays used in the Morian Hall of Paleontology are far more dynamic and visually interesting when compared to the previous two instances, as seen in both the provided photo and the photo on the museum's website article (HMNS n.d.), the platforms that the skeletons are presented on are still barebones and plain like SUE's and Big Al's.

The skeletons are also grouped all together and appear to be taken out of context in the article's picture (HMNS n.d.). Their poses and arrangement seem to put drama, public appeal (particularly towards youth audiences), and spectacle above scientific context and importance.

The Holothheater also functions as both a display of prestige and as a public attraction due to its advanced technology and its treatment of dinosaurs as entertainment. However, the depiction of the dinosaur on the website's banner is better than most portrayals because the dinosaur is depicted with feathers (HMNS n.d.). As a comparison, the *Walking With Dinosaurs* special on Big Al first aired in the year 2000, making its portrayal of unfeathered dinosaurs understandably outdated (Bartlett 2000).

ANALYSIS

What do these exhibits show us?

Many dinosaur exhibits and presentations rely on spectacle and appealing to children and their families, and owning and displaying dinosaur skeletons is considered prestigious and a main selling point for museums due to public perception. Some dinosaurs are also seen as monstrous or "superior" to other dinosaurs, such as Tyrannosaurus Rex, which makes them more prestigious than other dinosaurs (Noble 2016).

However, some displays seem underwhelming when compared to the scientific importance of particular specimens, such as SUE and Big Al, who are simply displayed on bare platforms in static walking poses. The spectacle of dinosaurs is also a large driving factor in museum displays and other media. The Houston Museum of Natural Sciences' Holothater is a prime example of this (HMNS n.d.).

Museums also spend exorbitant amounts of money on dinosaur fossils and skeletons, and the involvement of corporations and private donors in these transactions could be a source of critique, as in the case of Sue's purchase by the Field Museum (Field Museum 2018).

In all of the instances shown, the platforms and placements of the dinosaurs themselves are underwhelming. While the Houston Museum of Natural Sciences articulate the dinosaurs in interesting, dynamic poses, Sue and Big Al are both portrayed in static walking poses. All of the instances are also placed on bare platforms, either in corners by themselves, surrounded by similarly out-of-context skeletons, or in dynamic scenes and poses that also have no context or surroundings, and are simply dramatic for the sake of being dramatic.

The barebones displays in all three instances could be because the museums believe that the dinosaur skeletons speak for themselves and are spectacular enough on their own, but the bare platforms and lack of context or placement in nature causes them to feel artificial, as if they are not animals, and are merely objects to gawk at. The spectacle of the holothheater reinforces the idea that dinosaurs are simply meant for entertainment, rather than being actual formerly living animals (HMNS n.d.).

The treatment of dinosaurs as monstrous spectacles and sources of prestige and child's entertainment, taking them out of the context of nature and downplaying their role as animals and scientific triumphs both stems from and implies many things.

For example, the Second Jurassic Dinosaur Rush in the late 1800's propelled dinosaurs into the spotlight, gave them the prestige, public appeal, and competition that museums still desire and exploit to this day, and gave rise to modern paleontology and the technology that fossil preperators still use today (Brinkman 2010).

Attractions that made use of animatronics, first debuting in 1964 and exploding in popularity in the 1980's, also played a large role in making dinosaurs sources of public entertainment, spectacle, and profit (Rader 2014).

In a sense, so-called "Dinomania" (Brinkman 2010) never truly ended. These displays show that dinosaurs are, to this day, still primarily seen by the public as entertainment primarily for children, and treated as status symbols and moneymakers by the museums that display them instead of as the scientifically important glimpses into our earth's past, or as the actual animals they once were.

CONCLUSION



The displays examined here are reflections of how dinosaurs are treated in both public displays and wider media, and show how dinosaurs are often not treated or seen as animals and parts of nature, but as powerful monsters or objects for entertainment, spectacle, and moneymaking.

The prestige and public appeal of owning a massive and complete dinosaur skeleton has driven museums to compete against one another for the most spectacular specimens and displays ever since the Second Jurassic Dinosaur Rush of the late 1800's (Brinkman 2010). This causes the museums to put information about scientific importance, context, and nature aside in favor of wowing the general public.



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