PALEONTOLOGY

The dinosaur as social capital

A new history reveals how the wealthy elite helped shape modern natural history museums in America

By **Ilja Nieuwland**

The first 6 months of 1905 saw two prominent, celebrity-studded, and copiously publicized unveilings of full-size dinosaur exhibits. In February, the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) in New York unveiled its *Brontosaurus* mount; in April, Andrew Carnegie's donation of a cast of *Diplodocus carnegii* (his "namesake," as he liked to call it) was presented to the British Museum in London. As Lukas Rieppel explains in his book, *Assembling the Dinosaur*, neither the timing nor the place nor the form of these events rested on coincidence.

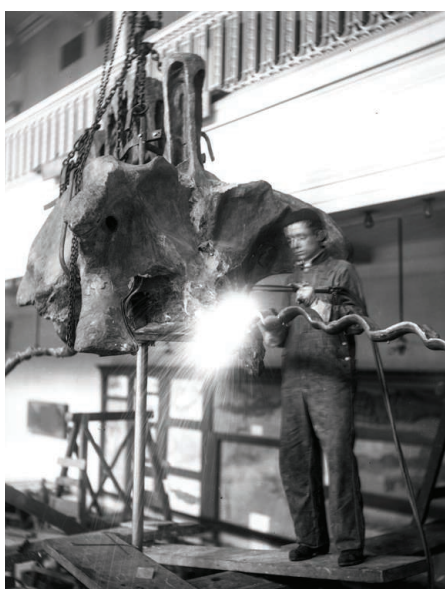
In the past decade, the "Long Gilded Age" of American natural history museums—roughly the last third of the 19th century and the first decade of the 20th—has been subjected to an unprecedented number of treatments (*1*–*3*). Rieppel's book is a welcome addition to this body of literature, not in the least because of his approach, which seeks to integrate dinosaurs' status "as an object of technical knowledge with social, cultural, and economic history."

The result is a book about dinosaurs that features surprisingly few of them (and fewer fossil hunters still). If that sounds like criticism, it is not. Rieppel's focus is on the people who used dinosaur mounts to convert monetary capital into social capital and, in so doing, built the natural history museums that define the museum landscape today.

At the turn of the 20th century, a time in which big things mattered, dinosaurs were a natural point of attraction for wealthy plutocrats. And because natural history museums could be instrumentalized to translate them into social capital and ideological metaphor, this created an almost natural bond between such institutions and wealthy benefactors looking for recognition.

Rieppel frames America's big natural history museums as tools for the dissemination of ideas about capitalism and society as much as they are tools for disseminating ideas about natural history. He shows how various financial and administrative mechanisms from capitalist ventures (particularly industry) shaped the operations of natural history museums and led to a strict regulation of both their internal and external relations.

The main focus is on the AMNH, arguably the United States's most important natural history museum, and its main figurehead, the paleontologist Henry Fairfield Osborn. In a sense, this book is a careful deconstruction of Osborn's efforts to instrumentalize natural history for ideological ends—ideologies that usually served the agenda of the AMNH's backers. A good example of this would be his advocacy of "aristogenesis," a concept that holds that evolution proceeds in a predetermined path that favors the "best" genes—an idea obviously attractive to patricians at the top of New York's social order.



The armature for a *Diplodocus* is welded at the Carnegie Museum of Natural History, ca. 1904.

PHOTO: CARNEGIE MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY

The same events were taking place in other new institutions, including Chicago's Field Museum and Pittsburgh's Carnegie Museum, both of which feature prominently in Rieppel's narrative. He describes how wealthy philanthropists such as Marshall Field and Andrew Carnegie shaped these institutions in much the same form as they had done with their commercial ventures: by applying a strict social hierarchy and rigorous bookkeeping throughout their respective organizations.

With the exception of Osborn, Rieppel may be somewhat guilty of underestimating intermediary figures such as William Holland and Frederick Skiff, who actually converted their proprietors' ideas into practice. These museum directors were not just delegates of their wealthy proprietors; they were their social equals and representatives, and although they rarely misunderstood the museum's role in generating social capital for their bosses, they also had agendas of their own. This could make things difficult when the museum's interests failed to coincide with the interests of its patrons. Even Holland, for example—no stranger to sycophancy—occasionally issued stern reprimands to Carnegie when he felt his boss was losing sight of the museum's interests.

Unlike the previous generation of collectors, the pressure was on new museum curators to prove themselves as the defenders of "pure" scientific interests. But, as Rieppel emphasizes, they eventually came to serve the same sociocommercial agenda because "pure" science was a highly valued ideological commodity whose aura could be made to fit more openly commercial agendas, too.

Assembling the Dinosaur is a solid entry into the growing body of literature on Gilded Age American paleontology, but it is particularly valuable for its contribution to enhancing our understanding of how science and its representation during that period were influenced by, and in turn affected, society as a whole. By incorporating cultural, economic, and scientific developments, Rieppel shines new light on the history of both American paleontology and museum exhibition practice. ■

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Assembling the Dinosaur
Fossil Hunters, Tycoons, and the Making of a Spectacle
Lukas Rieppel
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