



The big debate

Should museums stop using dioramas?

Many people enjoy the displays, but others say they have outlived their purpose.

What you need to know

- Artist Louis Daguerre is said to have come up with the term “diorama,” which he used for theatrical paintings in the 1800s.
- Wildlife expert and museum artist Carl Akeley is credited with creating the first diorama. It went up in 1889 at the Milwaukee Public Museum.
- Dioramas were common in museums by the early 1900s.
- Many of the animals in the displays are real and were once alive, while the humans typically are not.



A diorama featuring bighorn sheep at the Museum of Nature & Science in Denver, Colorado

For nearly 150 years, museum visitors have enjoyed gazing through glass at dioramas. These re-creations of animals in their habitat, and sometimes ancient people, can transport viewers into the past or to exotic landscapes filled with wild animals they might never see in person. Yet some museums and experts are reconsidering the use of dioramas. They think the displays are outdated and no longer the best way to inform visitors. The National Museum of Natural History in Washington, DC, got rid of its dioramas in 2003, and other museums have taken down displays that were offensive or incorrect. What do you think? Should museums stop using dioramas?

Yes—they're a thing of the past

Many dioramas are historically or scientifically inaccurate. They reflect outdated assumptions about ancient people, showing them with the wrong skin color, hair, and clothing. They also misrepresent animal behavior in the wild—for example, by showing male lions hunting when females are usually the hunters. And the use of real animals can be unsettling, especially because in the past, diorama creators hunted the animals—even if they were endangered—just to put them in displays. Museums have other options to replace dioramas, like animatronic puppets or virtual reality exhibits, and should use those instead.

No—they can still be useful

Dioramas are a valuable educational tool. They offer museum visitors a window into faraway places they might never visit and a look at wildlife they likely wouldn't encounter in person. They're also popular. Research shows that dioramas get people to stop and look at a museum exhibit, and museum staff members say they often hear visitors express wonder at the scenes. Besides, even inaccurate dioramas can be educational. Museums can put up signs explaining the inaccuracies or saying the dioramas reflected attitudes of their time. That can help visitors learn about how cultural and scientific knowledge has changed.

YES

Three reasons museums should stop using dioramas

- 1 Some dioramas show historically or scientifically inaccurate scenes.
- 2 Many dioramas use real animal remains, which can be harmful to the species and isn't appropriate for all viewers.
- 3 There are many kinds of new technology museums could use to create realistic, accurate, and equally compelling exhibits.

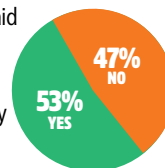
NO

Three reasons museums should not stop using dioramas

- 1 Dioramas give people a glimpse of places and animals they might never get the chance to see in real life.
- 2 They're popular with visitors, who stop to look at them and find them interesting.
- 3 Inaccurate or outdated dioramas can be updated to include proper context, which helps people learn even more.

LAST ISSUE'S POLL

Last issue, we asked if schools should reward attendance. Your votes were close: Just over half of you said yes to prizes for students who regularly attend class.



What do you think?

Now that you've read a bit more about this issue, visit kids.theweekjunior.com/polls so you can vote in our debate. Vote **YES** if you think museums should stop using dioramas or **NO** if you don't. We'll publish the results next week.

The goal of the big debate is to present two sides of an issue fairly in order to stimulate discussion and allow our readers to make up their minds. The views on this page do not reflect those of *The Week Junior*, and the page is not funded by third parties.