Does the original matter?

by Pedro Meyer

The image above was taken at a wonderful Natural Science Museum in La Plata, Argentina, which I was led to believe housed the world's largest herbivore dinosaur, the Argentinosaurus. It didn't, but a few interesting anecdotes related to that visit are worth mentioning.

This plant eater, weighed in at 100 tons, with 130-140 feet in length (40-42 meters) and dates back some 100 million years ago. A spate of mysterious monster finds has placed Argentina on the paleontology map in recent years. Fossilized discoveries over the past decade include Giganotosaurus, the largest dinosaur carnivore; Argentinosaurus, the largest herbivore; and other bones that suggest an even longer species. Thousands of eggs dating back 80 million years litter the land, a discovery that includes the first known impressions of dinosaur embryo skins. "We already recorded that this egg fossil horizon extends more than 20 kilometers. That is the largest dinosaur-nesting site in the world," said Coria, a native Patagonian and paleontologist at the Carmen Funes Museum.

The dinosaur heritage of Argentina may be richer than that of the United States and Canada combined. But natural history programs in the south lack the financial power of their counterparts in the north. Some Argentinean museums must leave dinosaur bones outside and behind their buildings, lacking the money to display them.

"They (Argentineans) have the bones, the Americans have the money," Flessa (former president of the Paleontology Society) said.

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Natural history museums in New York, Los Angeles, Atlanta and Alberta, Canada, have sponsored expeditions throughout Argentina, working together with institutions in Buenos Aires and Patagonia.

As Argentinean law forbids the export of dinosaur fossils, the display uses bone replicas. Flessa said the lack of original parts hardly matters.

"The techniques for making replicas of fossil bones are so good that it almost doesn't matter where the originals are any more," he said. "I don't think that science is hindered by the fact that the Argentinean government won't let dinosaurs outside the country."

The Atlanta museum boasts the first complete display outside of Argentina of a Giganotosaurus, which in the 1990s dethroned T. Rex as the largest known land carnivore.

Hall Train of Dinosaur Productions has lent his skill to reproduce copies of the Argentina dinosaur bones for Fernbank. The dinosaur reconstruction specialist has already produced some impressive works.

Train helped create a $20 million Triceratops for the Jurassic Park display at the new Universal Studios theme park in Orlando, Florida.

"It walks, pees, farts, and breathes. People think it's a real animal," Train said...

The fossil bones have been reproduced in fiberglass and suspended on an iron frame. The finished skeleton weighs several tons.

"We began in a disaster, by casting the largest vertebrae of Argentinousaurus," Lessem (head of the project to reconstruct the two skeletons at the Fernbank Museum in Altanta, Georgia) said. "The first giant (plastic) bone arrived on Halloween 1998 at Logan Airport in my home town of Boston. It had been smashed to pieces by customs agents who thought it was a modern sculpture possibly containing hidden drugs."

Only 10 per cent of the Argentinosaurus' remains were uncovered from a pebbled-filled block of sandstone. Among them, however, was a piece of the largest backbone ever found – a 1.6 meter high and wide vertebrae which weighs 20 tons. In all, paleontologists recovered a dozen backbone vertebrae, a few limb bones and part of the hips from this one dinosaur.

The obvious conclusion to this story is that in Argentina where the real bones remain, there was nothing much to be seen much to the dismay of my 6 year old child who was disappointed not to find the Argentionosaurus for which he had traveled half way across the world, and in Atlanta where they only have an animated replica, a curious public does find the inspiration to satisfy their imagination, by looking at a fiberglass representation that "walks, pees, farts and breathes".

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The photograph

Aside from the obvious issues of representation that the previous little story enthralls, let us explore now the picture on the cover at ZoneZero. It was taken with a small digital camera (Epson 3000z) set at its widest angle, however, the wide angle lens distorted the angles towards the back of the room, giving it the effect of almost falling over towards the left as can be seen in the image below. When I took the picture, I was careful to align at least one area parallel to the sides of the image (the cabinet windows), I settled on the left side and let the rest fall wherever it might, knowing that I could fix it later on.

Such a picture in pre-digital times would have required a view camera to correct such a distortion. Today we have the benefit of being able to put the image back to the correct angle such as it was in reality, but we do it using a computer. The benefits are obvious, greater ease of operation with less stuff to carry around and a more modest camera and lens can be used. The results? You can judge yourself by looking at the previous images. Those who have a long history and attachment to a view camera will find such a solution unacceptable.

As I see it, there is a common problem to these two events that unfolded from our visit to the Natural Science Museum in La Plata, both of these are derived from the use of new technologies, both are related to our traditional notion of representation and what we deem as appropriate. Share with us your points of view in the forums, tell us how you see these matters and how our world is being transformed in its formal representation.

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