



the whole family—and spend more money. Ripley’s Believe It or Not Odditorium, on 42nd Street between 7th and 8th avenues, opened this summer after abandoning Manhattan in 1972. Overshadowed by its next-door neighbor Madame Tussauds, whose waxed figure of celebrity Samuel L. Jackson attracts throngs, the Odditorium’s exterior is circus-lite. And getting in the door sets you back \$24.95.

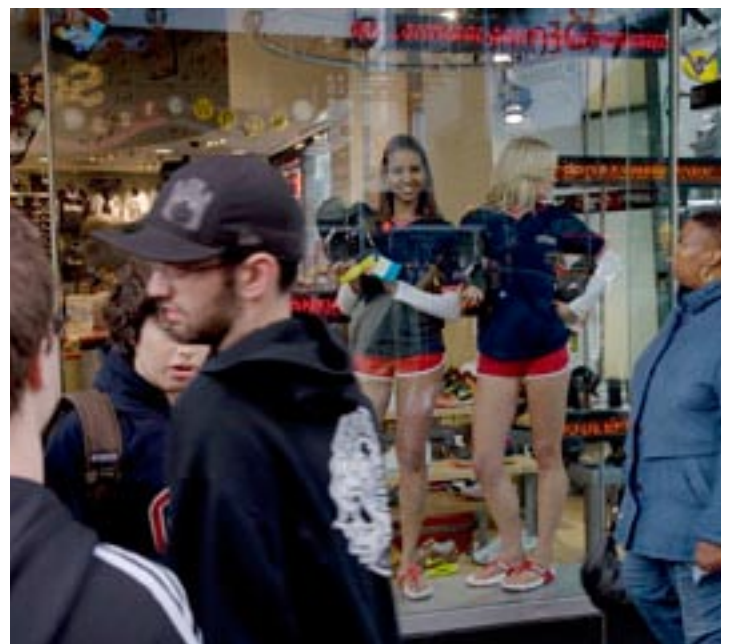
Robert Ripley—“proudly freaking out families year after year,” as the motto states—was a cartoonist, columnist, and amateur anthropologist who traveled to mostly exotic locales in search of adventure. He collected bizarre objects at a time when other men collected baseball cards: shrunk-en heads from Andean tribes, a Tibetan skull used as a bowl, a Thai woman on film subjected to neck elongation, medieval torture devices, and a well-used electric chair.

Despite the thrills and chills, historical context is nonexistent, cultural perversities are focused on the exotic, and several of the objects deemed “authentic” are borderline at best, but everyone enjoys a good laugh at someone else’s expense. And this is entertainment for everyone. You can safely shift from spectator to participant by insert-

## Times Square[d] Oddities

[words and photos by Dale H. Cotton]

The oddities of Times Square are no longer pimps, prostitutes, pushers, and hustlers. A new type of freak has emerged, but this time behind the facades of corporate entertainment venues and familiar stores—in exhibits and ads served up for paying customers. And instead of prostitutes on parade, you have cheerleaders in short-shorts selling flip flops. Instead of wayward kids on the hunt for a fix, you have the strategically dressed with trendy haircuts, designer clothes, and smoking cigarettes for effect. An Army recruiting station lit up in a neon American flag beckons in the middle of the Square. The message is one of safe entertainment, clean money, and bedroom sex. Bring





Some “facts” are worth knowing: that the Japanese Prime Minister Hideki Tojo and his six warlords looked “serene, clear, and clean” after their hangings for war crimes following World War II; that you must remove the skull itself to create a shrunken head; and that in circa 1200 BCE China, lying was considered a capital crime and those found guilty were chained to a metal pole and roasted in a fire just short of death. And how authentic is the death mask of Napoleon anyway, when it was “derived from the original casting”?

Frankly, I went in search of the shrunken heads, and in that Ripley didn’t disappoint. There’s even a framed 10-step recipe for how it’s done. Young warriors from the Jivaro tribe (Ecuadorian and Peruvian Amazon region) took heads of their slain enemies as a rite of passage (a “tsantsa”). However ghoulish this cultural trait is, if you do a little research of your own you find that these fierce tribes were one of the few that withstood the Spanish onslaught.

Strip away the supposed entertainment value, and most of these displays are perverse, prurient, and culturally racist. To turn this idea around, what if Ripley’s opened a satellite museum in China? Perhaps they would display the “oddities” accumulated over time in exotic America—like footage of

ing your head (protected under a plastic dome) into a display of killer insects, or by putting your head and arms into the stocks, or even by turning on the electric chair to see sparks fly.





ment quotient, anything goes. We can laugh at the fact that an 18th-century French criminal's head was cut in half to medically determine if it was somehow different from a normal person's brain, and then retreat to the suburbs to play with the dog, mow the lawn, and watch television.

The hot incandescent lights of the Great White Way have been replaced by chain-store logos lit up in cheery colors. In the new and improved Times Square, you can tell a book by its cover. The Odditorium will draw those in need of a fully sanctioned freak show, but what happened to those real-life freaks and deviants who once prowled the streets? Maybe they were too authentic.

Ripley's "believe it or not" is a little like Halloween's "trick or treat." To bring home the treat, you only have to show up at the door.

real electric chair killings, images of black people hanging from trees gawked at by white spectators, or silicone breast implants, and waterboards used on Abu Ghraib prisoners. For us, these things are too close to home and cannot function as entertainment.

Dividing life into distinct categories—the serious, the tragic, the comical, the pathetic—makes life manageable, and when it comes to the entertain-

