

SuperScience: Coming to Life

A museum artist creates scenes so lifelike that they might be mistaken for the real thing

By [Mona Chiang](#) | May 2006

Source: SuperScience

It's after closing hours at a natural-history museum. Suddenly, a giant *T. rex* skeleton roars to life. Models of ancient people step out of their **dioramas** and roam the museum's hallways. Well . . . that's what happened in the hit film *Night at the Museum*. Parts of the action-packed movie were filmed at the American Museum of Natural History in New York City. In reality, the museum is filled with dioramas that house lifelike models of ancient people and animals. But there's no danger that the figures will spring to life. Stephen Quinn knows that for sure.

Quinn is the senior project manager in charge of dioramas at the museum. He worked with scientists to create the realistic-looking scenes in the museum's Hall of Human Origins, which reopened this February.

Visitors to the new hall will see a series of scenes that show different periods in human history. "The scenes are like time machines that transport visitors into the past," says Quinn. For instance, in one diorama, a girl kneels in a snowy landscape. The scene shows how early modern humans (*Homo sapiens*) lived 15,000 years ago, during the last **glacial period**.

DETAILED DESIGN

To create the diorama of the ancient girl in the frozen landscape, Quinn supervised a team of artists and scientists. The artists created the physical setting and painted the background scenery. They also sculpted the human figures. To make sure that each of these elements accurately represents scientific findings, the artists worked closely with

museum scientists. “The scientists had the final say in every design detail, from the environment in which the figure is shown to the color of its eyes,” says Quinn.

The scientists instructed the artists to set the scene in an area in central Asia, which is now Ukraine. Scientific research suggests that the early humans who lived in this chilly region may have had light skin, blond hair, and blue eyes—just like the people who live in similar regions today. The early humans were also likely to have been active, tracking and hunting animals such as mammoths. So the people may have been lean and muscular.

BODY BUILDER

To create the female figure correctly, the team searched for someone alive today with similar physical features. They used that person as a model.

The artists started by making molds of the model’s hands and face. They used the molds to make a plaster head and hands for the figure. Then, the artists measured parts of the model’s body, such as leg length. Using the model’s measurements, sculptors created a metal “skeleton” for the figure.

Your skeleton has 206 bones. But the figure’s “skeleton” only follows the shape of the major bones, like the **humerus** and the **femur**. Sculptors then padded the metal skeleton with foam, and carved it into the model’s body dimensions.

After completing the figure of the girl, the artists painted it. The human skin has many shades, “so it took many layers of paint to get the skin to look right,” says Quinn. The head was then given blue glass eyes, and strand by strand, blond hair was applied to the figure. Finally, the artists dressed the figure in animal hides.

The figure looks so real that if you posed next to it, visitors might not be able to tell who’s the model. “If you blink, that might give you away,” says Quinn.

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