A Behind-the-Scenes Look at Flandrau With Exhibits Director Bill Plant

University Relations - Communications
March 2016

In Bill Plant's office at the UA's Flandrau Science Center and Planetarium sits a giant, copper-brown replica of the largest trilobite fossil ever found.

Plant, Flandrau's exhibits director, masterfully sculpted and painted the extinct marine arthropod fossil in his home garage for an exhibition at the center.

The technique and skills Plant uses to build replicas, such as the trilobite, come from years of experience dating to his museum preparation class at the College of the Atlantic, where as an undergraduate he helped research, sculpt and create a life-size pod of Atlantic white-sided dolphins for a natural history museum display.

Since then, Plant has combined his passions for art and science to help create exhibits for the Franklin Institute in Philadelphia, the UA's Biosphere 2 and for the past 11 years? Flandrau.

Each new exhibit at the center focuses on a scientific subject that Plant extensively studies in order to bring UA research and science to life with his inventive talent.

To provide an in-depth look at the exhibits that the Flandrau team creates, Plant talked with Lo Que Pasa about the exhibit selection process, what's on display and what visitors can expect to see at Flandrau in the near future.

What do you enjoy most about your job?

I would say working with talented and creative people to build something unique that we can share with our visitors. We have an amazing team here at Flandrau. Even though we are really small, we have such talented people on staff here that it allows us to do a lot of interesting things with a relatively small budget. There are also the many brilliant folks from across the University that I get to collaborate with on different exhibitions. And I get to make things, like the giant trilobite, which was on display in the "Meet the Trilobites" exhibit. Another favorite part of my job is immersing myself in some brand-new field or realm of science that I get to explore in a really deep way. For a good part of my job, I essentially live in a sandbox where I get to play.

What are some of the exhibits on display right now?

"Puzzles Proofs and Patterns ? Experience the World of Mathematics." The exhibition is the brainchild of a UA professor in the Department of Mathematics, David Glickenstein. Glickenstein saw one of our grant presentations and reached out to us saying he had a National Science Foundation Career grant, and he would love to do an exhibit with us as part of the education and public outreach component. It started out as a small exhibit about
modern geometry with the intent of fostering creative thinking and problem solving. As the idea for the exhibit progressed, we thought there was the potential to make it bigger and better than we initially envisioned, so we worked with some amazing people in the Department of Mathematics and turned it into this really great exhibit. We have also been working with local math teachers who helped us tie all of the activities to the educational standards for math, so it is great way for teachers to complement their in-class curriculum.

Also on display is "American Mineral Heritage ? The Harvard Collection [4]," which is a collaboration between the Harvard Mineralogical and Geological Museum and UA Mineral Museum. The UA Mineral Museum shares the same space as Flandrau with its main collection on the lower level of the building. "American Mineral Heritage" is filled with rare and spectacular specimens that have never been seen in Arizona, or even outside of the walls of Harvard, which is pretty amazing and not to be missed.

What is your favorite current exhibit?

I would probably have to say the puzzles exhibit. I find myself going in there and even though I know the solutions to them, I can't solve some of them sometimes. I forget and ask myself, "How did I do this before?" So it's still fun! And that was one we were working on for a long time, so it was such an accomplishment to complete it.

What is the exhibit selection process like?

Sometimes it's financially driven by grants we apply for. The puzzles exhibit is a good example of that. But in some cases it's a happenstance of a meeting with a faculty person who maybe says: "Oh, I do this and I have these really cool critters that I study." For example, someone in ecology and evolutionary biology sparked an idea, and then we said, "Let's do an exhibit about animals and plant adaptations, like what do animals do to survive ? camouflage, venom, prickly spines?" Then we started digging into it and realized animals and plants have developed some pretty strange and wonderful adaptations, which ultimately ended up spawning this exhibit that was called "Biters, Hiders, Stinkers and Stingers." And then there are exhibits we are developing, like an exhibit featuring the soon-to-launch OSIRIS-REx asteroid sample return mission being led by principal investigator Dante Lauretta from the Lunar and Planetary Lab just next door to us. That's such a fascinating mission that has been in the works for several years, so we knew we wanted to do something about it.

What can we expect to see on display in the future?

We can expect to see two new exhibits in the near future: OSIRIS-REx and the "Critical Zone" exhibit (a "pop-up book" maze through Earth's critical zone). We also are planning for new programs in the planetarium that will be associated with the OSIRIS-REx mission that we are working to finalize. You'll be able to learn all about the mission through exploring the exhibits and then go into the planetarium and "visit" the asteroid they are going to take a sample of, using our amazing full-dome projection system.

What is something people may not know about Flandrau?

"Marine Discovery" is an undergraduate course at the UA, and the lab portion of that class involves delivering a series of activities to local school kids. They are teaching about the importance of our oceans through activities like squid dissections and plankton races. It used to be offered at the Koffler building, but after meeting with the program's creator, Katrina
Mangin, we thought, "Hey, maybe we can do Marine Discovery here." So we converted old office space into a really cool marine lab with giant fish tanks, shark models and all types of specimens, where school groups can come in and explore all of these different aspects of marine science. With the success of that program, we are now offering three additional "Discovery" programs with a similar model? Insect, Chemistry and Physics.

**What do you want people to take away from the museum?**

I think each person is going to take away their own thing. I hope that is what we can offer: some special discovery or special unique experience for each person that comes through the door. And hopefully they have one of those moments where they learn something new or think about something differently than they did before they came through the door.

*The UA Flandrau Science Center and Planetarium is open seven days a week. Hours of operation, planetarium show times and more information can be found on the Flandrau website.* [5] Other exhibits now on display include the "Fossil Corner" [6], "From Tucson to the Moon" [7], "Light Beyond the Bulb" [8] and the "Mars Wall."

Source URL: https://uaatwork.arizona.edu/lqp/behind-scenes-look-flandrau-exhibits-director-bill-plant

Links: