

The Behrend Beacon

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# The coolest museum ever

 by Stevenson Swanson  
Knight Riddler

New York's newest museum is a discreet affair, the architectural equivalent of a plain brown wrapper.

The windows facing Fifth Avenue are opalescent to discourage peepers, and the entrance is around the corner on a side street, so museum visitors can slip in and out without attracting stares.

Tasteful lettering at knee-level reveals that behind these milk-white windows is a place devoted to the birds and bees. But this isn't a natural history museum. It's the Museum of Sex.

"Sex is wonderful, and it's here to stay," purrs a former stripper on the museum's audioguide. "I guarantee it."

Whether the Museum of Sex, MoSex, as it has dubbed itself, is also here to stay is another question.

Claiming to be the first American museum devoted to the subject, MoSex is attempting to walk an almost impossibly fine line. It wants to present serious scholarship about what academics call the history of sexuality. That includes not just shifting attitudes about sex but also such related matters as prostitution, birth control, and AIDS, all of which are covered in the museum's first exhibition, which opened last month.

But the museum's narrow galleries also brim with photos and films of naked men and women in a variety of geometrically arresting postures.

"We're clearly an educational institution," said Daniel Gluck, MoSex's founder.

But, "we believe pornography is a form of popular culture, like Levi's or Coca-Cola," he added. "We want to take this material and give it its proper place."

Public opinion may be fiercely divided on what that place is, but the museum's opening exhibit leaves little room for doubt that the right location for a sex museum is New York. Called "NYC Sex: How New York City Transformed Sex in America," the exhibit recounts nearly 200 years of sex and scandal in the Big Apple, from the sensational 1836 ax murder of prostitute Helen Jewett to former Mayor Rudolph Giuliani's battles to shut down porn shops in Times Square.

"We tried to show how sexual subcultures formed and how New York became Sodom on the Hudson," said

Gluck, 34, a former computer entrepreneur who spent more than four years bringing MoSex to fruition.

Shortly after the completion of the Erie Canal in the 1820s made New York the major American port, the city acquired its reputation as Sin City, a place open to all sexual permutations.

One display case features an 1855 guide to New York's bordellos, intended for the city's "sporting gentlemen."

But the city has been more than a setting for the salacious. Important free-speech and women's rights struggles played out in the city's courtrooms and streets.

New York was the home not only of Margaret Sanger, who helped coin the phrase "birth control" and worked to make contraceptives more readily available, but also of her nemesis, Anthony Comstock, head of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, who deemed contraceptives obscene because he believed they would lead to promiscuity.

In 33 years of raiding art galleries, newsstands, and other businesses, Comstock compiled a store of obscene material that, as Loyola University Chicago historian Timothy Gilfoyle notes, probably would have been lost otherwise. Some of the items on display at MoSex are from the Comstock lode.

Still, does lust really run more rampant in New York than in other cities? What about San Francisco, home of the Summer of Love in 1967? Or Chicago, whose Everleigh Club was nationally famous as a high-class brothel at the turn of the last century? A Playboy bunny waitress outfit on display at MoSex serves as a reminder that Hugh Hefner's magazine is still published in Chicago.

New York beats them all, argues Gilfoyle, the author of a history of 19th Century prostitution in New York and a member of MoSex's academically heavy advisory board.

"It's in the nature of the city, being the center of so much population movement and the center of the media and entertainment industries, to play the role of changing the way the country thinks about sex," he said. "Examples like Margaret Sanger and Anthony Comstock really do put New York in the center of a national story."

Even the modern condom industry owes a large debt to New York. In the late 19th Century, immigrant Julius Schmid realized that surplus sausage casings could be sewn up at one end to make prophylactics. Schmid's business

lives on, marketing Ramses and other brands.

Later exhibits tell the story of the city's thriving gay and lesbian communities, as well as such fetishes as sadomasochism, which was introduced in New York in the 1930s and 1940s when practitioners fled Nazi-occupied Europe.

Gluck hit upon the idea for a sex museum by chance. After selling a software company in the mid-1990s, he was casting around for a new project when friends recounted a visit to an Amsterdam sex museum. But European sex museums tend to be little more than glorified sex shops. He thought there was a place for a serious museum, a view Gilfoyle shares.

In the last 20 years, the field of sexual history has expanded rapidly, to the point that the University of Chicago publishes an academic journal devoted to the subject.

"Sex has a history," Gilfoyle said. "It just didn't start when we were born."

But the museum had a bumpy birth. Plans to build a new museum structure collapsed with the stock market, and later a state agency turned down Gluck's request for non-profit status, saying that his idea made a mockery of the word "museum."

MoSex, which has drawn more than 12,000 visitors since it opened, is housed in a modest five-story building on an undistinguished stretch of Fifth Avenue near Madison Square.

Even before the museum opened, the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights, which sided with Giuliani in his battles over displays of art he deemed offensive at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, labeled it the "Museum of Smut," or "MoSmut."

But most of the museum's critics have charged that the exhibition is not racy enough, especially for the hefty \$17 admission. "Boring," read one critique in the museum's comment book, predicting that MoSex would be "closed within the year."

Gluck understands the visitor's point, but he defends the museum's decision to start with a relatively academic approach to its subject.

"We started with a historic exhibit to show what we mean by a museum of sex," he said. "In our concern not to be perceived as leaning toward the titillating or pornographic side, we erred on the other side. If that means we're not the most exciting place, so be it."

## Through the looking glass

by Mike Pingree, KRT Campus

### OF COURSE I'LL COME BACK, DARLING

A man met an Australian woman who called herself Bergittia von Buelow de Rothschild over the Internet, brought her to Philadelphia and conducted a whirlwind courtship, culminating in his purchase of a diamond engagement ring worth more than \$12,000.

She took the ring, returned to Australia and stopped answering his e-mails. A private detective he hired found out she is a con artist.

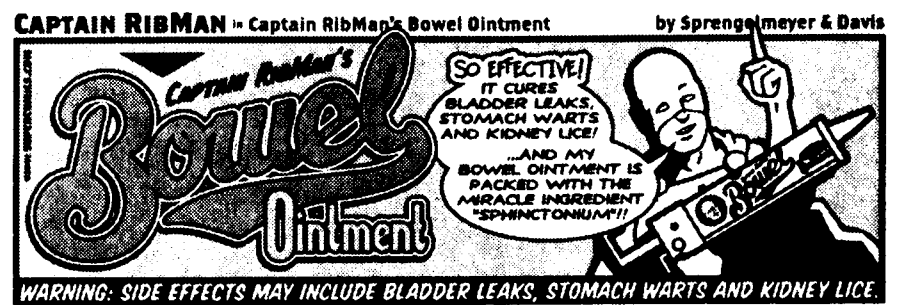
### IT WAS, UM, A SECURITY MEASURE

A Southern California high school water polo coach was fired for his role in secretly videotaping girls undressing and taking showers in the locker room.

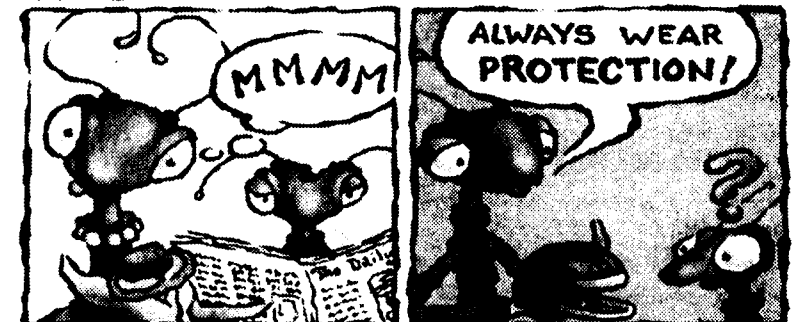
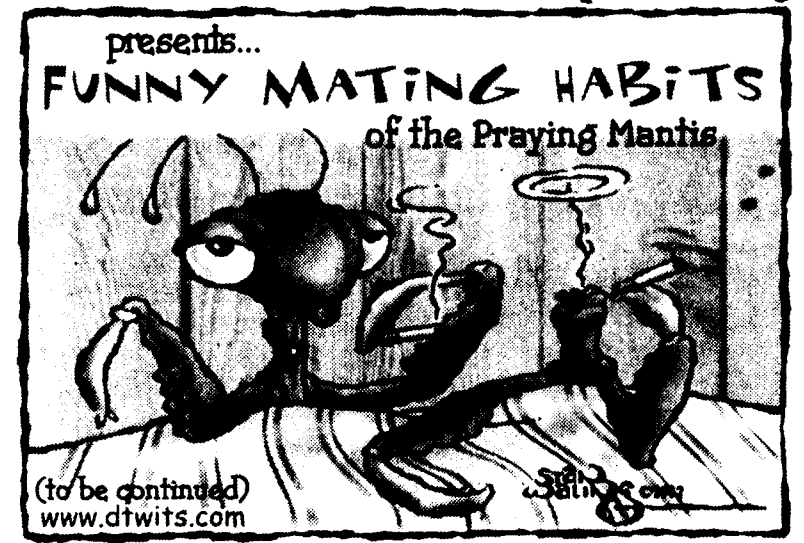
### I JUST FELT LIKE IT, OK!?

A man going up an escalator to work in a Brisbane, Australia, shopping mall was squirted on the back of his pants with two packets of soy sauce by the man behind him.

The victim told police he did not know the man, but, incredibly, it was not the first time the guy had done this to him. The squirter was arrested, but refused to explain why he did it.



## DITHERED TWITS by Stan Waling



## How much time do you spend on the Internet?

Knight Ridder Newspapers

Internet use is a staple of college students' academic experience. Here are some highlights from a recent study on how students use the Net:

- 79 percent agreed or strongly agreed that Internet use has had a positive impact on their college academic experience.
- 46 percent agreed that e-mail lets them express ideas to a professor that they would not have expressed in class.
- 73 percent said they use the Internet more than the library.
- 48 percent are required to use the Internet to contact other students in their classes.
- 68 percent reported subscribing to mailing lists on which they can carry on e-mail discussions about topics they're studying.
- 58 percent have used e-mail to discuss or find out a grade from an instructor.
- 65 percent who e-mail professors said they report absences via e-mail.

Source: The Pew Internet & American Life Project surveyed 2,054 U.S. college students at 27 two-year and four-year public and private institutions between March and June 2002. The findings have a margin of error of plus or minus 2 percentage points.

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