

## Bright Lights, Wide Eyes

by Edward Rothstein

There is nothing quite like the gasp that escapes your mouth as you walk through three small buildings on a quiet residential street in the small American town of Fort Mitchell, Kentucky, and find yourself mutely stared at by 1,400 eyes and grinned at by hundreds of painted lips over leathery chins. You are sharing company with beings barely this side of cartoon, bearing long proboscises or protruding goggle eyes, shapeless torsos and eerie charm. Lining the walls are photographs of these very figures perched on the knees or cradled against the shoulders of the men and women who once gave them voice: dummies and their ventriloquists.



Interior, Vent Haven Museum. Photograph by Edward Rothstein for The New York Times.

At the Vent Haven Museum the unsettling amazement is unremitting. In one room you almost feel as if you have bumbled onto a stage surrounded by a peculiar audience, each listener gawking in silence. In another the figures are arrayed in rows like Pinocchios who have finally made it to school.

Just as no two humans are smart in precisely the same way, no two of these creatures are dummies in precisely the same way. The gasps arise partly because you are overwhelmed by visceral sensations, the sheer accumulation of unexpected objects. The collection is the result of an obsession that wrenched these objects from their surroundings, in celebration of a craft.

The Vent Haven Museum grew out of the passion of William Shakespeare Berger, a Cincinnati businessman, who began accumulating the paraphernalia of the ventriloquist's art in 1910. He later served as president of the International Brotherhood of Ventriloquists and before his death, in 1972, endowed this museum, which began in his own home.

The effect of the Vent Haven Museum is intensely personal. Its figures are silent objects constructed in order to give voice to — what? Walk among them though, and you can almost hear the nattering rustle of jests and jokes. Two heads from 1820s London, made with papier-mâché and glass eyes, have the intensity of fine sculpture.

The word “ventriloquist” comes from Latin roots alluding to speech from the belly—which means speech from anywhere but where we expect. The ability to throw one's voice is cited by Hippocrates and alluded to in accounts of oracles. Cardinal Richelieu is said to have used a ventriloquist in 1624 to frighten one of his bishops. But it wasn't until the latter part of the 19th century that the disembodied voice found a secure home in a puppet. Here it isn't just the voice that is thrown; it is the imagination. Psychological realism generally trumps physical realism: the dummy gives voice to the psyche. It is really the dummy who vents, saying things the vent cannot. It is hard to imagine another place so clearly evoking the manifold powers and passions of the inner voice, simply by displaying figures who are its empty vessels—signs awaiting significance.

How else can you respond to silence so weighted with potential, except by producing an inarticulate cry? So we look. And we gasp.