

## WACKY WONDERS

Prepare to be amazed - and perplexed - by the bizarre yet fascinating attractions that await in New York's Times Square.

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PHOTOS BY NICOLE BENGIVENO/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Would you willingly walk into this mouth?!? This strange entrance at the Times Square Ripley's Believe It or Not! Odditorium is just one of many oddities visitors will see.

### IF YOU GO

- **Ripley's Believe It or Not!:** 234 W. 42nd St., Manhattan; 212-398-3133. Open daily 9 a.m. to 1 a.m.; last ticket sold at midnight. Admission: \$24.99; \$21.99 for 60 or older, students and military; \$18.99 for children 4-12; free for children younger than 4; [ripleysnewyork.com](http://ripleysnewyork.com).
- **Madame Tussauds:** 234 W. 42nd St., Manhattan; 212-512-9600. Open daily 10 a.m. Last ticket sold at 8 p.m. Sunday-Thursday; last ticket sold at 10 p.m. Friday and Saturday. Extended summer hours Memorial Day through Labor Day, 10 a.m. to midnight; last ticket sold at 10 p.m. Admission: \$29; \$26 for 60 or older; \$23 for children 4-12; free for children younger than 4; [www.nycwax.com](http://www.nycwax.com).



**A shrunken head on display in the Odditorium puts visitors in close quarters with a horror usually reserved for movies.**

NEW YORK — Before you leave even the first gallery in the Times Square Ripley’s Believe It or Not! Odditorium, which opened on West 42nd Street in June, you have already seen a six-legged cow, a legless acrobat, a car made of wood, the world’s ugliest woman and an albino giraffe. Look up: A bulbous replica of a 1,400-pound man hangs above the main floor, held aloft presumably just as the man himself was when a forklift heaved his body out of his home after he died in 1991.

If you are tempted to say, “Now I’ve seen everything,” believe it or not, you haven’t, because you have yet to see a miniature sculpture of Babe Ruth created from used chewing gum (“ABC Sculpture” it’s called); shrunken heads of an infant, toddler and boy executed by a barbaric Ecuadorean tribe (“No Child Left Behind”); and a four-legged chicken bred by a Romanian farmer to produce more drumsticks (“All Fowled Up”). By the time you pass through all 17,000 square feet of this attraction — museum is too solemn a word — you will have been amazed at many things, and perhaps even cry aloud a few times, asserting how much easier it would be to choose the second alternative in this franchise’s title than the first. This feeling is particularly intense when you are looking at something real rather than a replica — a shrunken head instead of the ugliest woman, an instrument of medieval torture instead of a photograph of a mutant.

And yes, along with the fascination comes a kind of unease. Circuses used to have freak shows in which (one cringes to recall) malformed, grotesque and exotic humanity was paraded before paying crowds. The freakish breaks all rules; it seems beyond belief because it fails to make any sense; it upsets comforting notions. The freakish is the ultimate avant-garde, a finger in the eye of the buttoned-up bourgeois vision of ordered life, like a tattoo parlor in the midst of a holistic spa.

The voyeuristic sense of gaining entry to a forbidden, exotic and at times unsettling realm is something Ripley’s shares with a neighboring attraction on 42nd Street: Madame Tussauds. Waxworks, since their origins in the 18th century, have offered a similar window into the world of exceptions, violations, disruptions. Royalty, celebrity and criminality were the great wax subjects. Madame Tussaud (who gave the attraction its now-jettisoned apostrophe) even made wax models from guillotined heads during the Reign of Terror. Waxworks traditionally include a chamber of horrors, even this one, which is more haunted by the personas of J.Lo and Britney than anybody resembling Jack the Ripper. But more about Madame and her institution a little later.

Despite some flaws (and some editing errors in the labels), the new Ripley’s is so entertaining and provocative that it’s worth special attention. Ripley’s hasn’t had a presence in New York since it abandoned Times Square in 1972, when the neighborhood started to become a bit too much like the shadowy world of extravagant desire and freakishness portrayed within. Now, the Odditorium can more comfortably be the exception to the surroundings rather than an extension of it.



**Visitors to Madame Tussauds in New York’s Times Square take pictures of Hillary Clinton — well, a wax likeness of her. As the name suggests**

But it is still intent on channeling the cartoonist, columnist and amateur anthropologist Robert LeRoy Ripley, whom newspaper readers in 1936 named the most popular man in America. His life could be recounted in the style he perfected for his “Believe It or Not!” feature:

- Ripley, who came to New York from San Francisco, tried out for the Giants in 1914 and was accepted! But he broke his pitching arm the very first game he played.
- Ripley began his cartooning career chronicling sports statistics and records, but he got more mileage from noting bizarre achievements. One Toronto man he cited “ran 100 yards backwards in 14 seconds.”
- Ripley’s feature became so successful that he traveled around the world adding to his collections from exotic locales. But he was terrified of the telephone.

For all his tireless energy, Ripley, in 1949 at the age of 55, suffered a fatal heart attack during a live broadcast of his television show . . . a show about the playing of taps at military funerals!

This was the man who, wearing a pith helmet, knickers and argyle socks, can be seen in videos at the Odditorium gleefully kicking up his heels with an African tribal dancer, or loading camels with memorabilia. His personal collections of beer steins, shrunken heads, tribal masks and “pranks of nature,” such as a two-headed calf, are sampled here. They also form the foundation of the other Odditoriums now run by Ripley Entertainment, which continues to add to the oddities. The label style remains a cross between the Coney Island barker and the cultural anthropologist. We are told, for example, that not telling the truth was a capital offense in ancient China, and that violators were tied to a heated stove pipe. Ripley’s label reads: “Liar, Liar, Pants on Fire.”



**Times Square Ripley's is truly odd, believe it or not.**

PHOTOS BY NICOLE BENGIVENO/THE NEW YORK TIMES

## **Thrills and chills**

A few steps east is Madame Tussauds. At first, there isn't a hint of anything odd. The waxworks, which from its founder's death in 1850 until 1970 was a purely British institution, has gone mass market. Tussauds is now part of Merlin Entertainments Group, with attractions in Amsterdam, London, New York, Las Vegas, Hong Kong and Shanghai. In October, one opened in Washington, D.C.

In the New York version, a huge model of the Hulk welcomes visitors, an *American Idol* room is a mini-theater and an overwrought presentation of Superman guides you to the gift shop. A good number of exhibitions such as these are promotional partnerships with other entertainment companies.

So is this just a matter of seeing life-size versions of images already too much with us (and some far too dated as well)? Is this why up to \$125,000 and six months labor are spent on each wax reproduction, some

of which also bear too vague a resemblance to the familiar images we know so well? But there is something else here, too, even if in its current incarnation, it all seems a bit denatured.

Until recently, wax figures at Tussauds were mostly shown within tableaux, posed in historical dioramas, roped off from viewers. When I saw the Tussauds in London, decades ago, figures from history gathered for momentous events. When Madame Tussaud trained in 18th-century Paris, waxworks even served as a kind of molten ticker tape, their ever-changing scenes chronicling the French Revolution's cataclysms.

But in the last generation, the ropes have come down. The figures stand or sit among the visitors. They are touched, groped, posed with. One large gallery is reserved for serious celebrities and high achievers: Abe Lincoln, Gandhi, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Leonard Bernstein, Bill Clinton and Albert Einstein literally rub shoulders with visiting schoolchildren and camera-wielding tourists.

As in Ripley's, history dissolves into sensation; here the thrill is celebrity. The close contact makes these figures seem familiar. They are placed on the same level as their visitors, who are even superior to them in lifelike qualities. But sometimes a wax figure looks out of those glass eyes with unusual intensity, or there is enough of a resemblance to remind the fleshy onlookers of something more mysterious in these curious figures.

Celebrity always involves a double move: an off-putting superiority felt through the intimacy of vulgar gossip. At Tussauds, the figures are neither off-putting nor vulgar. Instead, we find ourselves looking through odd lenses that, believe it or not, disrupt the cool poise of celebrity and leave everything even stranger than it once was.