Austin & Stone's Dime Museum

"Amid the formidable challenges of modernization, the dime museum was a safe haven, presenting unthreatening, comprehensible representations of the human and natural worlds."

- Andrea Stulman Dennett

Dime Museum audiences were similar to Circus audiences in their heterogeneity. Regardless of social or economic class one could go see a strange and various show, usually for an admission of between ten and fifty cents. Providing low-cost entertainment, Austin and Stone's Dime Museum (c. 1883-1912) occupied a palatial edifice in ScoUay Square at 4 Tremont Row. William Austin established the museum with Frank Stone to compete with Boston's New York Museum, which he had been involved with starting a few years earlier. Austin and Stone claimed that their museum was the largest existing, with two theatres and its own variety company, despite the scores of dime museums popping up across the country, including Barnum's American Museum in New York.

Some notable personalities at Austin and Stone's included "Oberta" the robot chess player, who won every game he played, and the "Oxfield Man" who, due to his arthritis, was slowly turning to stone. Described by the comedian Fred Allen in his book "Adventures of Me", Austin and Stone's, at one time, presided over by the strange and loquacious lecturer Professor William S. Hewitt's, the crowd would wander the theaters, long halls with small stages on each side, each stage occupied by another strange or exotic personality. Professor Hewitt, who would describe each act with great flair, when introducing a contortionist, Allen remembers his saying:

"Ladies and gentlemen, I ask you to observe the gyration and grandiloquence of this gentlemanless athlete as he endeavors to perform an almost impossible feat! Marvelous! Marvelous!" - Much Ado about Me, Fred Allen

Dime museums were at the height of their popularity between about 1860 and 1900. They began to open in the early 1800s when the first scientific and historical museums were being established. Without a rich endowment these museums, often just private libraries or small collections of books and objects with historical significance, like Charles Wilson Peale's American Museum in Philadelphia, began to supplement their income by hiring circus professionals during the winter season. Some dime museums were almost entirely devoted to the gymnastics, shockers, and sometimes disturbing freak shows, while legitimate scientific and natural history museums broke away from the world of entertainment.

The dime museum was a mercurial and altogether unique space in American entertainment. It was a new form of walk-through experience where the audience was often part of the production. Most of these pseudo-scientific "museums" also had theaters, which were carefully called "lecture rooms" to appease the Puritan anti-theater sentiment of the time. The main attractions, however, were the freak shows, magic tricks, and scientific displays focused on the newest and most divisive discoveries of the day, like Darwin's Theory of Evolution.

"For a 10 cent one-time admission charge, the dime museum dazzled men, women, and children with its dioramas, panoramas, georamas, cosmoramas, paintings, relics, freaks, stuffed animals, waxworks, theatrical performances. Nothing quite like it had existed."

- Andrea Stulman Dennett

Owners insisted the moral and educational rhetoric of the day, trying to attract the entire family to their establishments. However, little or no truly educational material was presented and many of the exhibits were fraudulent. Dime museums ranged from the mildly acceptable where biblical, temperance, and literary plays like Uncle Tom's Cabin could be seen in the lecture rooms alongside the freak shows of the modern age, to the genuinely deceptive museums which were simply a front for gambling and prostitution. These institutions were unique, at times they provided education, moral edification, and a challenge to mainstream politics and culture.