

DINOSAURS HAD SHARP TEETH!

PARTHENOGENESIS AND THE HOLOCENE DINOSAUR

Why is Chris doing all this?

For several years, Chris has been studying to become a self-taught professional pale-ontologist. He specializes in Dinosaur Aes-thetics, or why we think dinosaurs looked the way we think they looked. Why do we think of them as being a certain color, having certain patterns on their skin, having certain postures, moving in a par-ticular way, sounding a particular way? The way a dinosaur looks on the outside, the way it moves and acts, are a major part of what we think of when we think about dinosaurs. But these characteristics are ex-actly what we don't know about dinosaurs. Scientists study their fossils, and make valid educated guesses about these subjects, but they might disagree with each other, their ideas change over time, and they can never know for sure. A second level of subjectiv-ity comes into play when artists try to interpret the scientists' ideas whether for scientific illustrations or the entertainment industry. Artists have different levels of knowledge about paleontology: some may be very up to date, some may still think about dinosaurs in terms of where the sci-ence was when they were a kid. Some may like science and use it as their defining pri-ori-ty, while others may have little or no interest in representing dinosaurs in an accurate fashion.

Of course, this can be helpful too--sometimes scientists get new ideas from the artists as well. But in the end, we all end up with our own ideas about what dinosaurs looked and acted like, based on what images we've seen over our lives. What Chris is attempting to do is find out what we think about dinosaurs, and why.

Who cares about dinosaurs?

Everyone, apparently. If you can find chicken in the shape of dinosaurs, if there are towns where all the streets named after dinosaurs, then you know that they must mean something to our culture.

Why do we care about dinosaurs? Many people say that it's because they are big, scary, and dead--which is to say, awe-inspiring but safe. This makes a lot of sense. As can be seen in the data here, one of the strongest relationships people have to dinosaurs is on the visceral level --ferocity and power and fear. But it seems that we also use them in a different psychological way--that we think of them all as having differ-ent "personalities," in which one is the nice guy and another the tough guy, etc. The personali-ties we ascribe to them in movie after movie, book after book, are curiously similar to narra-tive archetypes in psychology, mythology, and novels. We automatically think in terms of these protagonist and antagonist roles, and have pro-jected our selves on to dinosaurs, precisely because we have such little information about them. We know just enough to tantalize us, but also little enough for them to easily populate our fantasy life, to act as a target for our wish fulfillments in the same way that comic book superheroes do.

Are dinosaurs for kids?

Dinosaurs are definitely for kids, because kids know awesome when they see it. Dinosaurs are exciting, different, and come with a whole world of new information that is constantly being added to through new discoveries. Dinosaurs offer in-tellectual discovery, creativity, mystery, and a sense of adventure for anyone who engages them.

But dinosaurs are for adults too. As described here, the way we use them psychologically can tell us a lot about our selves. Dinosaurs also provide unique evidence about evolution and the history of life, especially in terms of their evolution into the birds of today (who are the actual, literal Holocene dinosaurs). To give just one example, understanding the relationship between dinosaurs and birds has helped lead to the fairly important switch from using the Linnean form of sys-tematic biology to the new use of cladograms.

Psychologically and scientifically, dinosaurs can change the way we see our world.

ParthenoHolo Who?

Parthenogenesis is a word that describes the birth of the Roman goddess Athena. According to one legend, she sprang fullborn from the forehead of her father, Zeus. The word now refers to a situation where something leaps out of our imaginations as if it came from nowhere.

The Holocene is the current geological epoch, which began around 11,700 years ago.

The dinosaurs that live in our imagination, and in our books and movies, are Parthenogenic because we have created our own mental image of them to such a degree of detail and complexity that they seem as if they were still alive. Our mental image of them comes just as much from our minds (and from our art) as it does from their fossils, and so they are Holocene dinosaurs because they have been recreated in our own period for our own needs and uses. The Mezozoic dinosaurs were an entirely different animal, so to speak, than the ones we have made for (and out of) ourselves and for (and out of) our own time.

What am I looking at?

These are all interactive projects Chris has been doing for several years. They are a kind of experiment to see what people think about dinosaurs. These projects are all intended to be fun for the participant, and are usually designed as some form of game, challenge, creative activity, or questionnaire. After doing the projects for a while, Chris collates all the data and makes charts that show what he has learned through his investigations.

In this show, you can see the results of pre-vious participants' work, and can also par-ticipate yourself, which will inevitably lead to new results. Please feel free to do **any** of the interactive projects in the gallery!



PHOTO TAKEN AT THE CALGARY ZOO'S PREHISTORIC PARK

Chris would like to thank:

The Redhouse, for putting on a show about dinosaurs.

The Paleontology Research Institution, where he is an artist in residence. Chris has done his projects at their Museum of the Earth in Ithaca several times, as well as at their booth at the New York State Fair in Syracuse. Chris highly recommends this museum for anyone interested in paelontology, and he will show a further iteration of this work there in 2010.

The Interdisciplinary Committee in the College of Visual and Performing Arts at Syra-cuse University, who gave Chris an Interdisciplinary Grant to fund this project. This grant has been fundamental to Chris' ability to complete this work.

Erwin Nursery School, Moses DeWitt Elementary, Fowler High School, and the Col-lege of Creative Arts at the University of West Virginia, which let Chris visit their classes and do his projects with their students over the past year.

Chris' parents, wife, and kids, who have all been a big support with their time, energy, and willingness to hear Chris read dinosaur books aloud over and over and over again. If they didn't know what a therizinosaur is before, they know now!

CHRIS WILDRICK