

AGE OF THE MARVELOUS

[by John H. Lienhard](#)

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Today, we dine on marvels. The University of Houston's College of Engineering presents this series about the machines that make our civilization run, and the people whose ingenuity created them.

I just left the Art Museum this ordinary Saturday morning. But what I saw there was extraordinary. It was an exhibit called The Age of the Marvelous. The great change of thinking that marked the 1500s and 1600s was laid out like a visual feast.

This was a shift in vision I've craved to see in one place for a long time. Now, I have seen it, and I am not disappointed.

Two huge events had taken place by 1500. The printing press had come of age, and we'd discovered two new continents between Europe and Asia. The Americas gave us a trove of new exotica -- people, plants, and beasts we'd never imagined. That would only have fed new myths, without printing. But now we had printing, and we were learning to make books with elegant woodcut pictures.

So we look at books of maps and books of beasts. Edward Topsell's inventory of all living creatures is typical. It has pictures of unicorns and iguanas -- of cats and sphinxes.

But as we explored marvels from the new world, we also began exploring marvels within the human body. Gross anatomy turned into the first new pictorial science.

Here's Ambroise Paré's book On Monsters and Marvels. Half of it's about birth defects -- some real, some faked. The other half shows the creatures that sailors were talking about. Up on the wall, we look at Dürer's etching of a deformed pig.

The drawings begin making use of the perspective that Dü made into a formal science. A book by Galileo includes sketches he made of the moon, aided by perspective and his new telescope.

So the mood shifts in the 1600s. Art takes on scientific realism -- scientifically contrived. At the same time, it plays with our eye. It fools us intentionally. An open cupboard turns out to be only a picture of a cupboard.

The subtle point is that visual realism had led us away from the old magic and marvels. The new vision lived in a real world -- not a fanciful one. Now we had to invent the magic and myth that the new science had left behind.

Finally, this remarkable exhibit shows us theater set designs. By now we'd invented opera. Baroque opera was stage magic. Patrons may've lost the old magic, but they still wanted to be surprised. As the old marvels grew impotent we had to invent new marvels.

The one person who anticipated this entire revolution isn't here. But the Museum is about to add an exhibit of Leonardo da Vinci's anatomical studies. Then we'll have the whole stunning story of change in one place. I wonder if that won't make too rich a serving for anyone's eye to look upon -- all in one place.

I'm John Lienhard, at the University of Houston, where we're interested in the way inventive minds work.

(Theme music)

The Age of The Marvelous. (Joy Kenseth, ed.) Hanover, NH: Hood Museum of Art -- Dartmouth College, 1991.

The run of this traveling exhibit was from May 24th to August 28, 1992, at Houston's Museum of Fine Arts. It included prints and paintings, scientific artifacts, pieces of art, and a fine array of original books from the period. I am especially grateful to Alison Eckman and Sandra Zavaleta from The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, for their help with this episode. Other Engines episodes related to the shift to the external eye of renaissance art include Nos. [111](#), [327](#), [474](#), [511](#), [549](#), [598](#), [603](#), [610](#), [613](#), [614](#), [637](#), [689](#), and [702](#).