

## DINOSAURS IN THE CITY

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\* Exquisitely preserved paleontological specimens from Russia are wowing visitors to the museum.

No one is sure what 37-foot-long Tyrannosaurus bataars dined on 70 million years ago. But it was the scent of cold, hard cash that lured one of the beasts to The City Museum downtown.

The Tyrannosaurus bataar is one of 66 specimens in "Dinosaurs in the City," a touring exhibit from the Paleontological Institute of the Russian Academy of Science in Moscow.

The Russian economic crisis, along with some expert schmoozing, were key factors in bringing one of the world's most serious dinosaur exhibits to one of the world's most whimsical museums.

"The Russian Dinosaur Exposition," its official title, is the largest traveling exhibit of its kind and one of the most important dinosaur displays ever mounted.

"Other museums may have more specimens, or a giant Brontosaurus or T-rex to show off in their mezzanines, but few have the means to expound on a major evolutionary theme the way this one does," explained Dean Pruitt, science director at The City Museum and the man most responsible for bringing the show to St. Louis. "The evolution of life on land - that's what this exhibit is all about."

The exposition, valued at more than \$40 million, covers a span of about 180 million years. It displays terrestrial vertebrates from the Late Permian labyrinthodonts and mammal-like reptiles to the Late Cretaceous dinosaurs.

Here are exquisitely preserved meat-eaters and plant-eaters, including the Arstanosaurus, considered by many scientists as the finest small dinosaur skeleton ever found. Here lies the Karaurus sharovi, earliest known salamander, embedded in the fossilized silt where it perished. Perhaps it once scurried for its life from the likes of Longisquama insignis and Sharovipteryx mirabilis, two extremely unusual gliding reptiles.

There is a skeleton of the heavily armored Talaraurus plicatospineus; the huge shell of the turtle-like Ergilemys insolitus; and the skull of the menacing Velociraptor mongoliensis.

And then there are the skeletons Pruitt calls his "Hollywood dinosaurs."

They include the Tyrannosaurus bataar, the exhibit's showpiece, with its eight-inch-long, serrated teeth. It is considered the Asian cousin to the Tyrannosaurus rex, slightly shorter but otherwise identical. Despite the passing of thousands of millennia, its fearsome nature remains undiminished to a group of bite-sized third-graders who gawk in awe at the beast.

Nearby is another imposing giant, a three-story-tall Saurolophus anilustirostris, both awesome and comical with its duck-like beak stretched into an immortal grin.

Many of these petrified gems, pried out of air-tight graves in the dry environments of the Gobi desert and Ural mountain regions, are one-of-a-kind finds that may prove invaluable in completing the great evolutionary jigsaw puzzle.

This is the first time the Russians have mounted a traveling exhibit of this size. The Paleontological Institute had its pick of American museums that would have jumped at the chance to have served as host, including the Peabody Museum at Yale University and the Smithsonian Institution in Washington.

In fact, when the St. Louis Science Center got wind of "Dinosaurs in the City," it canceled plans to hold a Chinese dinosaur exhibit.

"What choice did they have?" Pruitt crowed. "We've got the real thing and what they were going to have were just plaster casts of dinosaurs, since the Chinese don't let real fossils out of the country."

Dwight Crandell, executive vice president of operations at the Science Center, concedes that the timing could not have been worse for his venue.

"The Chinese exhibit is on hold for a while," Crandell said.

Since "Dinosaurs In the City" opened in late October, it has entertained visitors from around the world, including representatives from the Peabody Museum and paleontologists from Taiwan and Thailand.

John McCarter, president of the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago, home to one of the nation's finest permanent exhibits, paid a recent visit to "Dinosaurs in the City."

"It's a wonderful and important exhibit. Very important scientifically but also exciting for what it brings to The City Museum and downtown St. Louis," said McCarter, who, as a federal government official in the 1960s, became acquainted with a St. Louis better known for demolishing its architectural treasures than for refurbishing them.

"For a long time, it seemed that there was a rip-'em-down approach to the old buildings in St. Louis. Now, it looks like things are being done to improve some of those beautiful, but outmoded buildings," he said.

Pruitt was in the right place at the right time four years ago. While in Moscow to oversee the installation of a laser and fiber optic system in the city's subway system, he visited the Paleontological Institute.

"The museum workers believed that, since I was an American, I must be either rich or a member of the Mafia. So they took me to meet Dr. Igor Novikov, deputy director of the museum," said Pruitt, 45, a man with all the spastic enthusiasm, avid curiosity and, judging by his wiry frame, the metabolism of a 10-year-old child.

Novikov confessed to Pruitt that the dissolution of the Soviet system had decimated the academy. The automatic infusion of rubles had been cut off. More than 100 of the world's best dinosaur scientists suddenly found themselves scraping by on the equivalent of \$20 a week, peddling trinkets from the gift shop to feed their families.

Pruitt told Novikov about the germ of an idea that Bob and Gail Cassilly had for building a new museum in St. Louis. It could use a stupendous dinosaur exhibit, he told the Russian.

"I told Bob (Cassilly), 'I'm bringing the Russian over. Here's the chance to convince him you're a sufficiently organized outfit that deserves to have this exhibit,'" Pruitt said.

Novikov met the Cassillys. He toured the museum's future site, two 10-story buildings - 1501-09 Washington Avenue and 701 North 15th Street - of what was once the world's largest shoe works.

Pruitt took Novikov on a dinosaur dig in western Kansas. And he introduced him to bass fishing on a pond at his farm near Millstadt.

"I schmoozed Novikov unmercifully to bring the exhibit to St. Louis first. It didn't hurt our cause that he caught an eight-pound bass," Pruitt joked.

And it didn't hurt that the Russians were desperate for cash. They agreed to rent the bones to the museum from October through May for a fee that exceeded \$250,000, according to Gail Cassilly, the museum's executive director. Gail Cassilly conceded that she had early doubts about whether the museum, already deeply in the hole, should sponsor the exhibit. (The museum still owes \$2.2 million, but Cassilly said that attendance, membership and gifts from the private sector have all been greater than expected. She hopes to retire the debt in as little as three to five years).

Cassilly said there was no way to calculate what percentage of the museum's roughly 70,000 visitors have come to see the dinosaur exhibit, but she believes it has been a success.

"My feeling so far is that the exhibit has been the best-kept secret here. It kind of got lost amid all the hoopla surrounding the grand opening. But it's definitely helped to show that we are more than just a big indoor playground. It proves we are a seriously motivated museum."

For more on the exhibit, see The City Museum's Web site at [www.citymuseum.org](http://www.citymuseum.org)

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"Dinosaurs in the City"

Where: The City Museum, 701 North 15th Street

When: 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Wednesday through Friday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturday and Sunday. Closed Monday and Tuesday.

How much: \$6; free for children under a year old Info: 231-2489

- Caption: PHOTOCOLOR Photos BY KAREN ELSHOUT Of the Post-Dispatch(1) Sandy Eidel, a teacher at Simon Says Preschool in south St. Louis, and 4-year-old Christina Medley share the wonder of dinosaurs in artwork created by children who have visited The City Museum.(2) BELOW - The 255 million-year-old skull of the Estemmenosuchus uralensis, which was labeled "the ugliest creature that ever lived" by the Russian scientist who unearthed him in 1960.(3)"My feeling so far is that the exhibit has been the best-kept secret here." says Gail Cassilly, the museum's executive director (4) "Other museums may have more specimens, or a giant Brontosaurus or T rex to

show off in their mezzanines, but few have the means to expound on a major evolutionary theme the way this one does," says Dean Pruitt, science director at The City Museum. He is holding the skull of a *Dicynodon trautscholdi*, which lived 245 million years ago.

*Index terms: MUSEUM; DISPLAY; ARCHAEOLOGY; CITY DINOSAURS REPTILES; PROFILE; PALEONTOLOGICAL INSTITUTE OF THE RUSSIAN ACADEMY DINOSAUR BONES EXHIBIT*

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