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A group of modern day "voyagers" recreated the 1691 landing at Peoria as part of the kick-off events for the observance of Peoria's 300 years of history.

- Photo: Mark Thompson

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CHICAGO'S



# Museum of Holography

Where pictures jump out  
to touch you

*by Robert Anderson*

"It's unbelievable. You walk around that museum and the flat pictures hanging on the wall seem to actually jump out at you. You reach forward to touch the image that sticks out of the picture. It's weird." These were the words of a visitor to Chicago's Museum of Holography.

A visitor tours this museum may be mystified that a flat image of a hand can seem to reach out to touch yours, or you walk around a flat image of a pitchfork because you're afraid of getting speared by a ghost-like image. It's a fun place to visit.

Holography is a relatively new science, not developed until 1960 when the first lasers necessary for creating a hologram were built. A hologram is a recording of the pattern of light waves as they are reflected from an object. This pattern is reflected on a photographic plate and when a light is shone on this plate, it reflects those light waves back and recreates the original object as a three-dimensional image (literally as points of light focused in





These images on display at the Museum of Holography represent the work of John Hoffmann, Charles Lysogorski and Edwina Orr (*clockwise*).

— Photos: Museum of Holography





space). That's why you duck around those holograms in the museum that seem to reach out to touch you. Like the man said, "It's weird."

But none of this is weird to museum director and founder, Loren Billings. She said, "For the first time we can record three-dimensionally as the eye sees an object. This kind of thing has applications in medicine, engineering, architecture, the arts and entertainment, to name a few.

"Out at Fermi Lab, for example, through holography they are viewing things that are otherwise hidden from the human eye. It's a new science and has great potential.

"Also, many companies are utilizing this holographic technology in credit cards and security documents, greeting cards, corporate advertisements and the like." (Both MasterCard and VISA cards have holograms on them.)

There are only a half dozen Museums of Holography in the world, and this writer had the opportunity to visit the one in Stockholm, Sweden, where many of their displays had to do with corporate advertising. What better way to catch a customer's eye than to have something reach out of a picture and seem to touch him?

Billings' museum is much more than a display. Hers is also a research center and school. She is affiliated with a number of prestigious firms helping in their research. Her school for beginners and advanced students is the only one like it in the world.

As you pass through the rooms of the museum, all of the "pictures" (holograms) appear to be outside the flat frame hanging on the wall. A basket of eggs seems to be hanging from the top of the frame. Three dimensional people beckon to be touched, but how do you touch light waves (which is all it is)? You can't.

But you can appreciate the technology behind these works of art that places simple photography back with the Model T if you compared the two. The lobby gallery and three others exhibit about 100 holograms measuring from three inches by three inches, to four feet by four feet. And you can purchase these to hang in your own house at prices that range from a few dollars to several thousand.

The museum is housed in a former Methodist publishing building with lots of wood paneling showing. It is an apt building for a museum. You

are in a special atmosphere when you enter this place, the ambience and the holographic displays. All ten thousand square feet of it.

Billings and the museum have been here since 1976. She considers herself and her staff pioneers in this art. And she stresses the word "art." She said, "Like anything new, we are looked upon with skepticism. Some look at holography as a technological novelty or artistic oddity. The arts community isn't ready yet to view our work carefully. I see this when I apply for grants to carry on our research."

Billings opened the museum to show off a group of framed wonders, and everyone who stops in, youngster or oldster, says "wow," "cool" and "how do they do that?" as they are intrigued by what they see. All those hyperboles were also emitted by Michael Jackson, who visited the museum and purchased some holograms.

What tools do you need to make a hologram? A laser, a beam splitter, a photographic subject and a plate of photographic emulsion. It's technical, but you don't have to understand this to appreciate holograms. Just like you don't try to figure out what kind of paint or brushes Rembrandt used; you just appreciate the final product.

Likewise in holography. But the young people who come do want to know the techniques involved and Loren and her staff are ready to answer all questions. In fact, it's best to ask for a guided tour because it adds a lot to the visit. ■

**Note:** The museum is open to the public Wednesday through Sunday, 12:30 to 5 p.m. It is located at 1134 W. Washington Blvd. Group tours can be arranged for any day of the week. For more information, call 1-312-226-1007.