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# THE PREHISTORY OF THE PEEPS DIORAMA

**BY SARAH ARCHER**

*Peeps dioramas occupy an intriguing place in American food culture.*

PHOTOGRAPH BY JOSEPH VICTOR STEFANCHIK FOR THE WASHINGTON POST VIA GETTY

In 2014, Matthew McFeeley and his friends Mary Clare Peate and Alex Baker created an intricate historical diorama depicting the 1963 March on Washington. Evoking the color palette of the photographs that document the real event, the diorama was painted in black, white, and shades of gray. Marchers are shown holding tiny, hand-painted signs that read “WE DEMAND VOTING RIGHTS NOW!” and “WE MARCH FOR JOBS FOR ALL NOW!” At the center of the action, the figure of Martin Luther King, Jr., stands at a podium, poised to give his legendary “I Have a Dream” speech. At the bottom of the steps leading up to the Lincoln Memorial, the crowd of spectators is dotted with what appears to be an ocean of regularly shaped bunny ears. Though painted gray, each character in this scene is a marshmallow Peep. This diorama, “I Have a Dream: Martin Luther King Jr. Addresses the People” won the 2014 *Washington Post* Peeps Diorama Contest, chosen by the *Post* staff from a field of over seven hundred competitors.



Peeps dioramas occupy an intriguing place in American food culture. They sit, wide-eyed, at the intersection of consumerist kitsch and a surprisingly earnest engagement with current events and history, to say nothing of the meticulous craftsmanship required for their construction. The scenes depicted in the dioramas that earn kudos on the competition circuit have included Vincent

van Gogh at work on a self-portrait, a leisurely game of cards in Marie Antoinette's private apartments at Versailles, the excavation of the tomb of Tutankhamen—complete with hieroglyphics featuring Peep-specific imagery—and a savvy reinterpretation of Edward Hopper's "Nighthawks." The impulse that seems to be most frequently rewarded is the attempt to juxtapose highbrow subject matter with marshmallow-based sculptural matter.

What's more, Peep dioramas bring together, in their modest fashion, two distinct traditions that have previously not appeared to have much in common: the elaborate sugar sculptures and figurative-confectionery traditions of Europe and the Victorian craze for dioramas and miniatures.

In addition to being sticky and solid at room temperature, sugar is an effective natural preservative, making it ideal for artistic endeavors. In the late Middle Ages, banquets sometimes featured a "subtlety" (or "sotiltee"), a sugar sculpture that could take the form of a ship, say, or a scene from a fable, or even of a philosopher

(<http://www.bl.uk/learning/langlit/booksforcooks/med/medievalfood.html>).

Sugar was a luxury good, and these items were also displays of wealth. In her 2014 installation "A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby," the artist Kara Walker highlighted the brutal labor

(<http://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-sugar-sphinx>) required to produce the sugar that took these delicate forms.

By the early Renaissance, inventive European court confectioners were crafting elaborate sculptures for special meals, often designed to echo or compliment the themes of the musical or theatrical entertainments that would accompany a banquet. These could also be allegorical in nature, depicting religious scenes or commemorating military victories. At the wedding of Maria de Medici to Henri IV, in Florence, in 1600, the groom was not in attendance, but he was represented by an impressive sugar sculpture depicting him on horseback.

In the eighteenth century, sugar figures came to represent the last word in courtly fashion, serving as kinds of miniature 3-D fashion plates for the nobility who gazed at them during meals. The demure ceramic figurines that we see in museums today are essentially permanent, non-edible versions of the lively tabletop sculptures that were originally made from sugar. The sugar and

ceramic counterparts probably coexisted side by side, according to Carolin C. Young, the author of “Apples of Gold in Settings of Silver: Stories of Dinner as a Work of Art.”

After an architectural phase during the rise of neoclassicism in the nineteenth century, sugar sculpture seems to have fallen out of favor, like so many luxuries, as a result of belt-tightening during the First World War. Dioramas, meanwhile, became a well-established form of education and entertainment, enthralling Victorian viewers with the spectacle of a well-controlled and delightfully tiny world.

Eventually, shoeboxes gave elementary-school dioramas a commonly accepted scale—one that just happens to be the perfect size for a Peepscape. In 2004, a St. Paul *Pioneer Press* staff writer named Richard Chin was asked to come up with something to fill space in an Easter Sunday feature section ([http://www.twincities.com/peeps/ci\\_20213601/cmon-people-we-had-first-diorama-contest](http://www.twincities.com/peeps/ci_20213601/cmon-people-we-had-first-diorama-contest)). “I knew that a lot of people had tongue-in-cheek fun with Peeps—like doing quasi-scientific experiments with them, microwave jousting contests, eating contests,” he said. “But I never heard of a diorama contest, so I thought, why not?” The first contest featured quite a few crucifixion scenes—partly inspired, Chin thinks, by that year’s surprise box office hit “The Passion of the Christ.” There was also an entry that Chin describes as “sort of quadriptych created by a couple of Catholic schoolgirls depicting the martyrdom of four saints, including the stoning of a Peep St. Stephen with jelly beans.”

In 2007, the *Washington Post* followed the lead of the *Pioneer Press* and created what is now probably the best-known Peeps contest in the United States. The 2015 edition (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/lifestyle/peeps-diorama-contest/2015/>) just concluded, and, in something of a departure from past years, the winning diorama, by Becky Heaton and Suzan Maher, is a rustic scene in which “hidden” Peeps have been “painted and textured to look like wood, foliage, water, smoke, and other natural materials.” Faintly reminiscent of the work of the Chinese artist Liu Bolin (<http://www.artnet.com/artists/liu-bolin/>), who “disappears” by disguising himself in front of elaborate background scenery, this diorama may well raise the conceptual bar on the competition circuit. Or not: Heaton and Maher’s diorama was reportedly “inspired by a commercial for Lucky Charms cereal in which a man is

camouflaged as a bookcase.” But for all the self-conscious silliness of the endeavor, last year’s winners see something more exalted in it. Mary Clare Peate uses the term “applied existentialism.” As she explained: “One gets a unique life perspective after embracing the absurdity of spending an hour perfecting, say, a very stylish, hand-sewn tie for a tiny sugar-coated bunny.”

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