



Step Right Up

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Both men were successful. Both put up buildings on Broadway to house their work. Both were artists of a sort, exploring the line between reality and fiction.

Phineas T. Barnum specialized in ... well ... humbug. A 19th-century word, humbug stood for deception and fraud -- usually of a harmless variety.



Video
Clip

In 1841, Barnum opened the American Museum -- a museum dedicated to humbug, like a 161-year-old woman who claimed to be George Washington's boyhood nursemaid and the "Fejee mermaid," advertised in posters as a beautiful woman who was half-fish and half-human (but was actually the shriveled torso of a monkey sewn onto the tail of a fish.)

Barnum understood humbug. People liked to be fooled, and would pay for the pleasure of figuring out how the trick was done.



P.T. Barnum with "Tom Thumb"



Mathew Brady's studio

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Barnum also became the first big celebrity promoter, in the modern sense. In 1849, he arranged a New York tour by Swedish singer Jenny Lind, and launched such a successful publicity campaign that a kind of "Lind fever" took over the city.


People came to photographer Mathew Brady for a different kind of image: daguerrotype portraits. A new invention from France, the daguerrotype captured reality with light and chemicals. Brady had a lavish studio and photographed many famous persons of his day: Andrew Jackson, Daniel Webster, Abraham Lincoln. Later, Brady took and

displayed Civil War shots. It was the first time distant civilians could see the horrors of modern war within days of a battle.

Humbug or photograph, Barnum and Brady were pioneers. Together, they helped invent mass journalism, mass entertainment, and mass culture.

Top illustration: "Phineas Taylor Barnum and Charles Sherwood Stratton ('Tom Thumb')," courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution, National Portrait Gallery.

Illustration at bottom: "Brady's New Daguerreotype Saloon, New York," courtesy of the Collection of the New-York Historical Society.

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