

Anniversaries

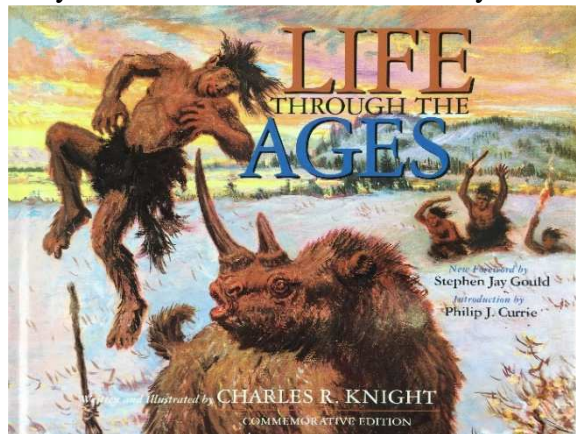
Published 75 years ago



Charles R. Knight (1874-1953) *Life Through the Ages*

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Seventy-five years ago, in 1946, American artist Charles R. Knight published a book titled *Life Through the Ages*. Knight is the most famous and influential American paleoartist. During the early decades of the twentieth century he created many images of life in the past for displays in



museums such as the American Museum of Natural History in New York City, the Field Museum in Chicago, and the La Brea Tar Pits museum in Los Angeles. He also illustrated many books and magazine articles.

The cover illustration for *Life Through the Ages*—chosen by Knight or his publisher—shows a woolly rhinoceros tossing a hapless Cro-Magnon hunter into the air. The hunter’s friends are seen helplessly rushing to his aid across a field of deep snow.

It was typical of Knight to show drama in his art. One of his most famous paintings depicts a fierce battle involving two theropod dinosaurs. These are the images that introduced many American children and their parents to the world of dinosaurs and Ice Age monsters, and many of them are still on display in natural history museums today.

Knight’s 1946 book is an excellent example of a genre of paleoart that I call the “pageant-of-life-through-time”. It is a form of storytelling in which paleontologists and their artist or museum-design collaborators tell illustrated stories of life through geologic time (Gould 1993; Rowland, 2021). The paleontologists create a sequence of scenes, representing extinct species and past ecosystems, usually arranged in chronological order. The goal is to provide a time-travel experience in which viewers are visually transported back through unimaginably long periods of geologic time, stopping multiple times along the way for a glimpse of the animals and plants that were living at a particular time, and the ecological setting in which they lived.



It is, of course, an old storytelling strategy that predates James Hutton, Georges Cuvier, and the geologic concept of “former worlds”. An example of a religious forerunner of the pageant-of-life-through-time paleoart genre is the series of images constituting the “Stations of the Cross,” found in many Western Christian churches. Each of the traditional fourteen stations depicts an episode in the story of the crucifixion of Christ, providing the observer an opportunity to vicariously embark on his or her own personal pilgrimage along Via Dolorosa to Mount Calvary.



It was inevitable, perhaps, that geologists and paleontologists, as they painstakingly reconstructed ancient episodes in the history of life on Earth, and desired to communicate their work to the general public, would adopt this powerful storytelling technique. The pageant-of-life-through-time genre leads the viewer on a pilgrimage along the Via Dolorosa of deep time. Charles R. Knight’s *Life Through the Ages* is just one of many examples of this venerable artistic tradition.

Further Reading

GOULD, S. J., 1993. Reconstructing (and deconstructing) the past. In: *The Book of Life*, ed. by S. J. Gould. New York, Norton, p. 6-21.

ROWLAND, S. M. 2021. The Fritz Zerritsch/Eric Thenius suite of paleontological wall roll-ups and the Pageant-of-Life-Through-Time genre of paleontological art. In: *The Evolution of Paleontological Art*, ed. by R. M. Clary, G. D. Rosenberg, and D. C. Evans. Geological Society of America, Memoir 218, in press.

RUDWICK, M. J. S., 1992. *Scenes from Deep Time*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press.

Publication online: IUGS E-Bulletin Issue 173, March 2021.

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History of Geological Sciences (INHIGEO)

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