



Exhibiting People For Money: Terminology¹

Many terms have been used to refer to the practice of exhibiting people for money and to the various forms that such exhibits took. "Raree Show" and "Hall of Human Curiosities" were early-19th century terms. "Sideshow," "Pitshow," "Odditorium," "Congress of Human Wonders," "Museum of Nature's Mistakes," "Freak Show," and a host of others were late 19th and early 20th century designations.

A broad range of terms were applied to the people exhibited, the freaks. Because natural scientists and physicians were interested in many exhibits, and because showmen exploited scientific interest in constructing freaks, the language is a complex hodgepodge of medical terminology and show-world hype. "Curiosities," "lusus naturae," "freaks of nature," rarities," "oddities," "eccentricities," "wonders," "marvels," "nature's mistakes," "strange people," "prodigies," "monsters," "very special people," and "freaks" form a partial list. The exact use and definition of these words varies from user to user and from time to time.

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¹Adapted from Robert Bogdan, Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988. Used with permission.