SOMETIME IN THE EARLY 1950s I stumbled upon a strange television show that featured objects emerging from a cloud of smoke accompanied by very unusual music. The show followed a simple format: three experts attempted to identify objects that were certainly not from my world. It seemed to be a quiz show, but absent a strong sense of drama. The experts did not compete for money or collect points to crown a winner. In fact, the panel engaged in a polite give-and-take conversation. The show turned out to be *What in the World?*, with objects and most of the experts from the Penn Museum. I quickly became a devoted fan. Over a half century later, I have been fortunate to work with the Museum’s collection of *What in the World?* documents and videos, which provided a welcome opportunity to revisit and explore the show’s history.

The germination of the idea for *What in the World?* occurred in 1948 when Penn Museum Director Froelich Rainey appeared in a television program that was part of an educational series jointly produced by the Museum and WPTZ-TV (the Philadelphia affiliate of NBC at that time). In that show Rainey was teamed with Eskimo scholar Helge Larsen, discussing various objects from that culture. However, before it aired they decided to abandon the script and to improvise, much to the chagrin of the program director. The crew on the other hand was delighted by what they saw, leading Rainey to feel...
that such an approach might be appealing to a broader audience. This is the way he described that moment in his autobiography, *Reflections of a Digger*.

As we went along ad-libbing our conversation it occurred to me to pick up one of the objects and as a “straight man” ask Helge what it was. Soon I began to notice the young men in the crew...missing their cues. Afterward I learned from them that it was not only the odd things that Helge said about such strange objects, but the original, extemporaneous, and unexpected conversation...I saw the possibility of taking archaeology and anthropology to the millions via television.

Inspired by that experience the Penn Museum discussed a weekly “archaeological quiz show” with WPTZ, but the station, according to Rainey, found the idea “too high hat [and] too stuffy.” Shortly after, Charley Vanda, a Vice President of WCAU (a Philadelphia affiliate of CBS at the time), “agreed to give it a try.” According to Rainey it went on the air in either late 1949 or early 1950; no documentation exists indicating a specific date. Rainey also claimed that WCAU canceled the show when he requested compensation, and returned it to the air a few weeks later—with compensation for him—after receiving considerable mail protesting its cancellation. It was on April 11, 1950, the date most often cited as the initial broadcast of the series, when *What in the World?* began its remarkably long tenure. It ran locally until late in 1950 when CBS bought the rights to the show, after which it was seen nationally on about 80 stations. It continued as a network offering until CBS dropped it in March of 1955, but later that year WCAU resumed telecasting it once again as a local program.

Largely due to the introduction of video taping, *What in the World?* regained national exposure in 1963 when National Education Television (a precursor to PBS) packaged 26 episodes that were sold to about 70 non-commercial stations that included several large markets such as New York, Houston, Seattle, and Chicago. The unprecedented long run of 16 years finally ended when WCAU cancelled the show in 1966. In the early 1980s a serious attempt was made by the Museum to resurrect *What in the World?,* but the effort did not succeed.

It is widely believed that *What in the World?* was a Penn Museum program, but legally it was not. Instead it was a matter of a personal contract or agreement between WCAU and Froelich Rainey. Rainey always contended that it was his property, although there is no evidence that he attempted to legally establish that claim prior to 1955, when he acquired a copyright designating him as sole author of the show. In that same year he described in a letter to WCAU “a working understanding that the program is owned jointly by [him] and WCAU.” In fact the two parties did act as co-owners, even though the legality of that assumption is murky. All legal documents were signed by Rainey as himself, and not as a representative of the Museum. In addition it was agreed that Rainey would be compensated if the program was sold (which never occurred). When the show aired in 1950 he was paid $500 per episode (equivalent to $4,700 in 2012), of which $200 was kept by Rainey and $100 paid to each of the three panel members. There is no record of the Museum receiving any direct payments; however, there is little question that it benefited from the positive publicity generated by the program.
This engaging program began life with the pedestrian and ill-fitting title *You’re on the Spot*, which alluded to the task of experts attempting to identify the objects. The April 11, 1950, program was rehearsed with that title, but sometime before the day of the broadcast, the decision was made to air it as *What in the World?* The effect of the new title symbolically shifted the emphasis from the panel to the objects.

The first stage set, which was claustrophobic and amateurish, consisted of Rainey and three experts inspecting objects while sitting around what was referred to as a treasure chest of Persian design. Shortly after June 1950, and before it went national on CBS, the show’s design underwent a radical transformation under the direction of Robert Forrest. The moderator—usually Rainey, but at times the Associate Director of the Museum, Alfred Kidder II—was now seated at an elevated desk, with the panel standing around a small pedestal where the object rested. Added as well was the iconic staging of the object emerging from a cloud of dry ice–induced smoke, accompanied by the strains of eerie music—excerpts from Stravinsky’s *Rites of Spring*. Also notable was an off-stage...
voice informing the viewing audience of the identity of the object prior to the panel’s attempt at identifying it. As one reviewer commented, this enhanced the entertainment value by evoking a degree of suspense, allowing the viewer to judge how close the panel was to getting the identification right. There was little question that this new staging, somewhat sophisticated for its time, enhanced the program’s production values.

The set was to undergo one last major change in the 1960s when the show was being produced by George B. Dessart, a young employee of WCAU who remained at the station as a Vice President until 1985. The new look took on a decidedly more minimalist appearance with the moderator and panel now seated around one large round table, similar to the earlier set that had the participants seated around the Persian chest.
The panel of experts consisted primarily of anthropologists and archaeologists, and to a lesser extent artists and art historians. Approximately 100 individuals appeared on the panel (some many times) over the life of the program, including notables such as Carleton Coon, Jacques Lipchitz, Margaret Mead, Ashley Montagu, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Ralph Linton, and Loren Eiseley. The guest who seemed to cause the most excitement, however, was the actor Vincent Price, who appeared on December 4, 1954, sharing the program with Carleton Coon and Jacques Lipchitz. At first blush it seemed to be an unexpected choice to have a well-known actor as a panel member. Rainey did introduce him as a “rather unusual” guest, but he was quick to say that the actor was an art collector. Indeed he was, but there was considerably more in his background that justified that choice. Besides having a degree in Art History from Yale, and writing a book on the drawings of Delacroix, Price was also a collector of Mesoamerican, Native American, and African artifacts. Price and his wife eventually donated about 9,000 pieces from their collection to the East Los Angeles Community College, where it is currently housed in the Vincent Price Art Museum. He certainly...
held his own that day alongside Coon and Lipchitz, as he demonstrated detailed knowledge of Mesoamerican, African, and South Pacific cultures. Fortunately the kinescope of that episode is preserved and can be viewed online at http://archive.org/details/upenn-f16-4002_what_in_the_world_4.

It did not take long for national media and critics to take notice. Positive reviews and articles in high-profile publications like Life, The New Yorker, and Variety appeared by 1951. But the most notable event occurred in 1952 when the program received the prestigious Peabody Award. Most reviewers expressed surprise that a rather modest and low-key program, dealing with what many would consider arcane topics, could be entertaining. As one reviewer expressed it: “It seemed such a dry and uninteresting matter…and all of a sudden archaeology and anthropology became matters of greater interest than Howdy Doody, Kukla, Fran and Ollie, and Burt Tillstrom.” Although the show had a very loyal fan base, the size of the audience remained limited, attested to by its failure to attract commercial sponsors. According to Carleton Coon’s autobiography, there was perhaps one exception: “Alpo tried it once…[but we] were told that we didn’t sell enough dog food.”

If measuring the success of a program is longevity, audience loyalty, and critical acclaim, then What in the World? was indeed successful. A considerable amount of credit for that achievement is due Fra Rainey, not only for envisaging the idea and managing the show, but also for recognizing that television could play a role in introducing to the viewing public intellectual pursuits that are usually confined to the halls of academia. Coming into existence during the early “Golden Age” of American television was very fortunate for the show as well, as it was a time when the networks were amenable to airing cultural and educational programs with limited audience numbers.

In the early 1950s not everyone owned a television, as table models cost as much as $400 ($3700 in today’s dollars), and the household “penetration rate” was a fraction of what it is today. One estimate had only 30,000 TV sets in Philadelphia in 1948, meaning the potential for a large audience did not exist. In fact television had yet to eclipse radio as the major entertainment venue for household consumption, with radio generating substantially larger audience numbers. As a consequence the networks engaged in a competition to acquire “prestige” programs that had limited economic viability. This was a sentiment expressed by Charles Vanda, head of WCAU-TV, in a letter to Rainey, indicating that WCAU was willing to sell What in the World? to CBS at a small profit because they “were doing a public service for the Museum.” Although public service ads and announcements for CBS shows replaced commercial sponsors, a small but loyal audience and favorable critical reviews must have convinced CBS to keep the program on the air for as long as it did. However, by the early 1960s commercial television had become a big business with audience numbers and ad revenues determining programming decisions. Despite its loyal fan base, What in the World?, like other notable cultural shows such as Omnibus, was a casualty of this new media environment.

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