

Taking delight in a fright: how haunted houses came about

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TOP: A photo of the Hatbox Ghost figure inside The Haunted Mansion at the Disneyland Resort in Anaheim, California; Wikimedia Commons. MIDDLE: A waxwork model in Madame Tussaud's Chamber of Horrors in 1911; Topical Press Agency/Getty Images. BOTTOM: A big crowd waits in line at Disneyland's Haunted Mansion; Wikimedia Commons.

The scariest haunted house of 2016 is on the outskirts of Austin, Texas. That's according to the website *Hauntworld*, which ranks the scariest attractions in the United States each year. Called *House of Torment*, this year's winner features flesh-eating zombies, crazed monsters and terrifying clowns. Last year's winner, *Haunted Overload*, dropped slightly in this year's rankings of the scariest haunted houses, but it is still so scary that people with heart conditions are warned against buying tickets.

This is what a haunted house is supposed to do. They exist to scare people. The idea behind haunted houses is not new, of course, as people have entertained themselves with spooky stories for centuries. Haunted houses are different, though, because they cannot be separated from the holiday that made them famous. The tradition could not exist without Halloween, and Halloween would not be the same without it.

The origins of the haunted house date back to 19th-century London. A series of illusions and attractions introduced the public to new forms of gruesome entertainment. In 1802, the French artist Marie Tussaud shocked British audiences with an exhibition of wax sculptures of headless French figures, including King Louis XVI and Queen Marie Antoinette, whose heads were chopped off in the French Revolution. When Tussaud set up a permanent London exhibition, she called it the "Chamber of Horrors." The name has stuck to the wax museum to this day.



Public Appetite For Horror Picks Up

At the turn of the 20th century, the closest relatives to modern haunted houses began experimenting with gruesome themes. In Paris, the Grand Guignol theater became notorious for its on-stage depictions of people being torn limb from limb. The theater's director, Max Maurey, famously bragged that he judged each performance by the number of people who passed out in the audience. In 1915, an English fairground in Liphook debuted one of the first "ghost houses," an early type of horror attraction. The public appetite for horror was picking up.

Lisa Morton, author of "Trick or Treat: A History of Halloween," said that Halloween-themed haunted houses first emerged during the Great Depression during the 1930s. American parents were trying to come up with ways to distract young tricksters, whose holiday pranks included damaging property, vandalism and harassing strangers. "They came in about the same time as trick-or-treat did," she says. "Cities looked for ways to buy these kids off, essentially."

Those first haunted houses were very primitive. Groups of families would decorate their basements and hold parties. Kids could spook themselves by traveling from basement to basement and experiencing different scary scenes. A 1937 party pamphlet describes how parents could also design "trails of terror" to spook their children:

An outside entrance leads to a rendezvous with ghosts and witches in the cellar or attic. Hang old fur, strips of raw liver on walls, where one feels his way to dark steps. Weird moans and howls come from dark corners, damp sponges and hair nets hung from the ceiling touch his face. Doorways are blockaded so that guests must crawl through a long dark tunnel. At the end he hears a plaintive 'meow' and sees a black cardboard cat outlined in luminous paint.

Disneyland's Haunted Mansion Opens

The haunted house didn't become a cultural icon, though, until Disneyland opened its Haunted Mansion in 1969. The attraction quickly became a success; in a single day shortly after it opened, more than 82,000 people passed through. The attraction's centerpiece is the Grand Hall, a 90-foot-long ballroom sequence of dancing ghouls at a birthday party. "It's the start of the haunted attraction industry," Morton says.

Within a few years, the haunted house had spread across the country.

As Hollywood began to embrace slasher movies like "Halloween," "A Nightmare on Elm Street," and "Friday the 13th," the haunted house industry saw the benefits. The horror boom fueled a

demand for scary attractions.

Professional haunted houses first emerged as a force in the same era, quickly outspending nonprofit groups, which also ran them. Then, tragedy struck when a fire at a haunted house in New Jersey trapped and killed eight teenagers. Soon, attractions were shut down, and politicians enacted stronger safety regulations. Volunteer organizations struggled to compete against new competition under tougher rules, and soon, many were forced out of business by bigger, splashier professional haunted houses. It was a watershed moment for the industry, says Larry Kirchner. He's the president of Haunted House Association, a trade group for haunted house operators.



Haunted Houses Earn Big Money

During the next two decades, the number of professional haunted houses grew wildly. Kirchner estimates that roughly 2,700 of them operated nationwide last year. A large haunted house attraction can reportedly earn \$3 million during the Halloween season, and the industry is worth \$300 million, according to an NBC report.

These days, haunted houses are no longer just about creepy characters and hyper-realistic horror. Instead, the industry has embraced all sorts of new, extreme frights, including zombie runs, escape games and experiences that aim to traumatize. How long will these successes last? Can the haunted house last another half-century?

Kirchner doubts that the haunted house is here to stay. "If I was going to guess, I'd say no," he says. "Every business will eventually fail, so we just want to last as long as we possibly can."

A Halloween without haunted houses? Now that's a scary thought.

Quiz

- 1 Select the paragraph from the section "Haunted Houses Earn Big Money" that describes how newer haunted houses have created very intense adventures for guests.
- 2 Which of the following sentences from the article BEST explains WHY haunted houses were originally set up during Halloween?
- (A) Haunted houses are different, though, because they cannot be separated from the holiday that made them famous.
 - (B) American parents were trying to come up with ways to distract young tricksters, whose holiday pranks included damaging property, vandalism and harassing strangers.
 - (C) As Hollywood began to embrace slasher movies like "Halloween," "A Nightmare on Elm Street," and "Friday the 13th," the haunted house industry saw the benefits.
 - (D) A large haunted house attraction can reportedly earn \$3 million during the Halloween season, and the industry is worth \$300 million, according to an NBC report.

- 3 Read the sentence from the introduction [paragraphs 1-3].

A series of illusions and attractions introduced the public to new forms of gruesome entertainment.

Which of the following words from the third paragraph of the introduction provides context clues to the meaning of the word "gruesome"?

- (A) exhibition
 - (B) wax
 - (C) headless
 - (D) permanent
- 4 Read the sentence from the section "Disneyland's Haunted Mansion Opens."

It was a watershed moment for the industry, says Larry Kirchner.

The author uses the phrase "a watershed moment" to mean:

- (A) an alarming change
- (B) a positive direction
- (C) a significant turning point
- (D) an unfortunate event