



CULTURE

# HISTORY GOES HOLLYWOOD

### Anxious about dwindling crowds and shorter attention spans, museums and historical sites are turning to special effects to tell their stories

By NATHAN THORNBURGH MOUNT VERNON

**H**ISTORICAL-MUSEUM CURATORS CAN be a contentious bunch—get between two of them debating whether the Smithsonian exhibit of First Ladies' ball gowns is real history, and you may want to John Wilkes Booth one or both of them. But nearly all curators will agree that they are battling a common enemy: public indifference. If you're in the history business, you're competing for shrinking wallets and tighter leisure time. Schools teach less history, so kids have less of an idea about what happened at your venue or why it matters. And those same kids have perhaps more veto power over vacation plans and weekend outings than ever before. Worse yet, there's probably a theme park right down the road with the same dark thoughts about its survival but with 10 times your advertising budget. Even your local multiplex is feeling a little sorry for itself, but it has millions of dollars worth of fresh Hollywood product cycling in every few weeks. "Theme parks and movies are leaving museums scrambling to keep up," says Lin Ezell, director of the National Museum of the Marine Corps. "Passive exhibits just aren't going to attract young people today."

There is a cure, but it can be controversial. The basic philosophy: if you can't beat 'em, join 'em. Become one of the increasing number of museums and historical sites that are redesign-

ing their collections with high-tech interfaces, action-packed short films and theme-park aesthetics. The Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library & Museum opened in Springfield, Ill., last year with a talking Honest Abe hologram and a host of other educational parlor tricks. The Marine Corps museum, opening in Quantico, Va., near Washington in November, will use changes in temperature and humidity to immerse its visitors—and, it hopes, drum up recruits—in harrowing and heroic battlescapes ranging from the icy mountains of Korea to the sweltering jungles of Vietnam. Colonial Williamsburg is looking at supplementing the costumed re-creations that made it an early pioneer in that approach with Palm Pilots that visitors can point at various landmarks to get video presentations.



THE LEGACY Mount Vernon, as it has looked for two centuries

Venerable Mount Vernon, Va., home of the nation's first President, will next month offer its own blend of entertainment and education. Workers and curators are putting the finishing touches on a \$60 million, 66,700-sq.-ft. museum and visitors center. When they open, on Oct. 27, half the museum will have traditional displays: maps, artifacts, Martha's jewelry. The other side, however, will offer a heavy dose of showmanship. A scrolling cartoon of Washington's life will be projected on one wall. A theater will show an action flick about Washington at war. The audience's seats will rattle when the cannons go off, and visitors will be dusted with simulated snow when Washington crosses the Delaware River. There will be a handful of



MODERN MAKEOVER: An artist finishes an illuminated sculpture of Washington's face