Tales of Ocean Park, Santa Monica and other Magic Places

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The Unforgettable Parke Meek

"The customer is always *wrong!*"

Above: *The late Parke Meek was an iconic, irascible, talented, opinionated curmudgeon, friend and co-founder of jAdis on Main Street in Ocean Park*

Filled to the brim with antique scientific instruments and sci-fi movie paraphernalia, jAdis at 2701 Main Street is part film prop rental shop, part science history museum and part retail store. Above all things, it's an extensive collection that speaks to the passion and character of one man, founder Parke Meek.

Meet Parke Meek

Born on January 1, 1924, in Ft. Wayne, Indiana. Parke only had a sixth-grade education but he started his business career at an early age. Legend has it he was a bag-boy delivering Kessler's whiskey for local bootleggers during Prohibition. The words "ask for Maggie" was code for an innocent looking 9-year-old Parke to deliver a bag of hooch to some local client. Being underage he would never be suspected or prosecuted, and he never was.

Below: *The ever-changing window at jAdis is always full of interesting relics and gadgets including a model of The Hindenberg, one of Tesla's coils and a reproduction of the robot from the movie "Metropolis".*

Parke was a Marine in WWII

He enlisted in the Marines at age 17 during World War II and served with the 1st Marine Division, which included landing at the notoriously gruesome Guadalcanal. Later, Parke remembered that, "Yes, the war was hell," but at the same time, marveled at the wonder of a tropical rain forest, the divine fragrance of the many flowering plants, "and those ripples of water and that BIG MOON!" Coming from the cornfields of Indiana, he found the South Pacific exciting and didn't want to come home. After 3 years, his mother wrote his Commanding Officer and complained. Parke was sent back.

After the War and despite limited formal training, his exceptional mechanical and design skills led to working for architectural luminaries. He built interior cabinets for the Haynes House in Ft. Wayne, Indiana, the city's only house designed by Frank Lloyd Wright. He recounted how during the course of construction, Mrs. Haynes became pregnant with her second child and asked FLW to modify the

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jAdis is a Wonderland Full of Contraptions

design. Wright's response? "Either don't build the house or don't have the child!" Parke came up with the solution: a folding room divider, not telling Mr. Wright.

Long career at the Office of Charles and Ray Eames

In the 1950s, during the Korean War, Parke moved to California with his wife and young son. Having heard about that "Charlie Eames guy" in Venice, he decided to check it out and drove from Camp Pendleton to Venice – wearing his Marine Corp uniform. Charles gave him a tour of the Office and Parke was intrigued. When he heard there was a job opening in the furniture department, he returned and applied for the position. He was hired on the spot on the strength of the rebuilt Ford woody wagon he had driven to the interview and which served as his "portfolio". For the next 25 years he worked at the Office of Charles and Ray Eames, functioning as in-house wizard and resident problem solver who could turn their concepts into reality. He made furniture, crafted prototypes, built models, resolved technical issues, and did the stop motion animation for many Eames films including *Toccata for Toy Trains* (1957).

Working for the esteemed Charles and Ray Eames must have been an education for Parke in many fields of endeavour. I'm sure he learned a lot from them but I am also sure, what we will never hear about, is how much they learned from him. He was capable of meeting every challenge they threw in his direction.

Parke opens Ephemera

In the late 1960s, while still with the Eameses, he opened "Ephemera" on what's now Abbot Kinney Blvd. jAdis co-founder, Susan Lieberman calls it L.A.'s first vintage clothing store. The Rolling Stones were customers. Like jAdis, the shop was open only a few hours a week, on Saturdays, adding to its allure. He would make frequent trips to the U.K. and bring back British Bobby coats and other vintage styles that were so popular during the Swinging 60s. Once he forgot to

Below: Susan Liebeman and Parke Meek at the opening of jAdis, 1976

The jAdis Building See Page 1

When built by Joseph F. Rhodes in 1926, this commercial building was typical of buildings that appeared across the city in the early 20th century. Today it is one of the more intact examples of this architecture. The building is Landmarked.

jAdis, was opened in 1976 by the creative duo, Susan Lieberman and Parke Meek, who had worked at the Office of Charles and Ray Eames Design for almost 30 years. When it opened, the shop specialized in Art Deco furniture, antiques, architectural pieces, decorative objects and reproduction props that found their way into film, television, and stage productions.

When Lieberman's line of vintage clothing needed more room, they acquired the space next door, calling it "Paris 1900". In 1981, in homage to the Art Nouveau curves of Maxim's Restaurant in Paris, Meek redesigned the facade of Lieberman's store. The result was a widely admired masterpiece he hand-crafted, and installed with the help of Roger Johnson.

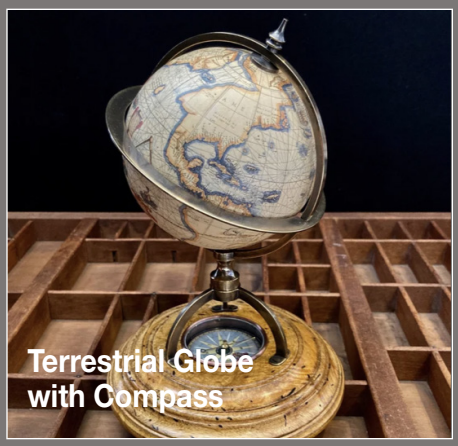
You Never Know what You'll find at jAdis!

Bronze Armillary Sphere

Keychains

Bronze Compass with Hinged Lid

Free Standing Spiral Staircase


Terrestrial Globe with Compass

30 Minute Hourglass with Bronzed Case

lock the front door and when he arrived, there was money and a note referencing the jacket the customer had taken.

Beginning of jAdis

In 1976, Meek co-founded jAdis with his longtime partner, Susan Lieberman. The store recently marked its 50th year milestone at 2701 Main Street.

The two met when Susan was a young receptionist and assistant to Ray Eames. She remembers their first meeting: "I saw this guy with a ponytail and tank top and jeans and a leather belt with a big question mark on the buckle. He put a foot on my desk, leaned forward and extended his hand and pronounced, 'Hi! I'm Parke!"

Somewhat taken aback and describing herself at the time as "kind of a conservative New England girl" Lieberman remembers thinking, "He must be very good at what he does to look like that, in a place like this."

jAdis started out as a place to house their collections of cameras, wood-working tools, vintage clothing, optical equipment and Art Deco. In the 1980s they designed and fabricated a line of tubular chrome furniture that was Bauhaus inspired.

After a large order of the furniture line went to Tokyo, Parke lost interest and changed direction and began building props. Inspired by Mel Brooks' film,

www.jadisprops.com , @jadisprops

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Above: The staff of the Office of Ray and Charles Eames. Parke Meek on the far left, Ray and Charles Eames in the front center.

"Young Frankenstein", Parke set out to source gauges and switches and Tesla Coils, etc. and create a Mad Scientist's Lab. He loved building, knew what would look good on camera, and had a very successful run. His props are still being rented out today.

His props have been used in many productions, including *The Prestige, Batman and Robin, Waterworld, X-Files, Gods and Monsters, Oppenheimer, Spider Noir,* and many more.

Lieberman says prop rentals were "a fabulous little business because he could collect the stuff, he could build stuff, he could rent it out, make money on it." Best of all, he got everything back. At heart, Parke was a lifelong collector and used to joke that, "the one who dies with the most junk, wins."

The unique shop reflects Meek's lifelong passion for analog craftsmanship and mechanical ingenuity. For many years, the storefront window featured a replica of the robot from Fritz Lang's *Metropolis.* This is the one item Susan regrets selling - so many people remember seeing that robot as children.

During the prop building period, jAdis was closed to the public and only open to the industry. These days the store is open Friday to Sunday 11 - 5, by appointment or by chance.

The store's unusual contents attract a wide array of visitors of all ages and all corners of the globe. Visitors are fascinated by the mechanical airships, large spinning gears, Tesla coils, Van de Graaf generators and all manner of pre-digital inventions.

jAdis continues today

Parke passed away in 2010 at the age of 86. He claimed he had been "lucky to have been born in the right time and in the right place to have as much fun as possible." He believed he had had a "charmed life", and he did.

Lieberman's own passion runs to textiles. Originally she had them in jAdis alongside their Art Deco furniture line, but when the shop next door became vacant, she moved her collection of linen, lace and vintage garments there. It was Meek who suggested the Art Nouveau décor for the store she named "Paris 1900," and he built the window's facade. Modeled after an 1895 storefront in Brussels, the building has been landmarked.

Lieberman enjoyed the buying trips.

The two of them used to make multiple collecting/buying trips each year, most often to the Midwest. "We used to go to farmhouses where the wife would have a little antique store on the side," she says.

An homage to the Metropolis robot wearing a replica helmet from the "City of Lost Children".

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Susan Lieberman inside jAdis.

Mel Bloch, holding a molded plywood leg splint developed by the Eames Office for the Navy during WWII.

"If I saw something I wanted but was unsure, he would say, 'Trust your judgment,'" she says. "He never said no."

Bloch's thoughts about Parke

Their good friend, Mel Bloch – who taught chess at the Santa Monica Public Library and Farmer's Market and was a local legend in his own right – had this to say about Parke: "Despite his giant shadow across the face of contemporary design, Parke was as down to earth as is humanly possible. He was self-effacing and modest to the point that few who met him ever knew what an intellectual heavyweight he was. Parke Meek was among the rarest of men, in that he told the plain truth, did not suffer fools, yet had not a single enemy.

Meek was blunt

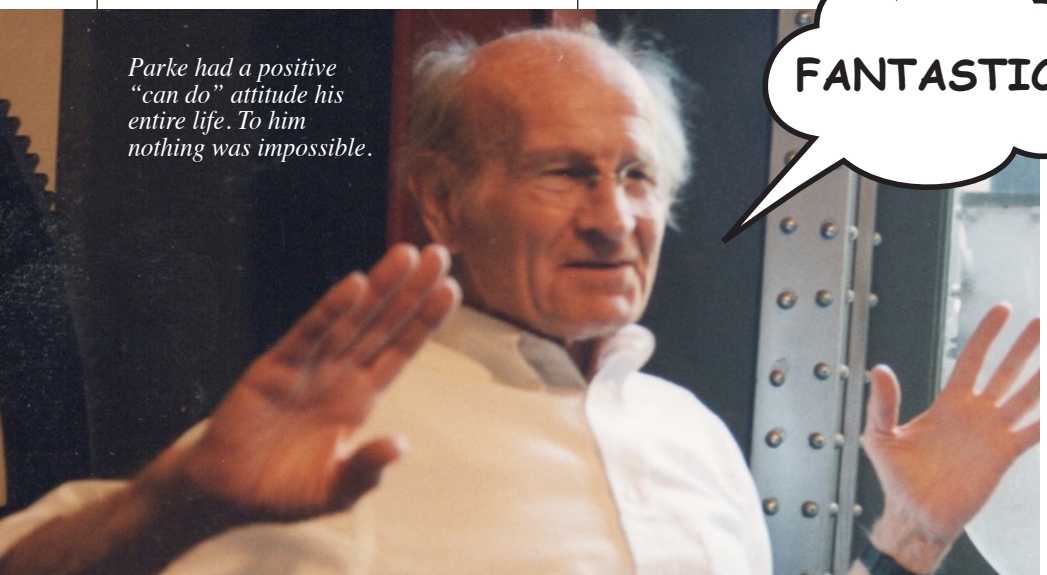
Bloch said he was never shy to speak his mind. Bloch remembers when a Hollywood celebrity came into his antique shop wanting Meek to build him something. He had plenty of cash to throw around, but Meek kicked him out of the store after he heard how the celebrity spoke to his wife.

"She gave you children and you speak to her like that? Get out of my store," Bloch remembers Meek saying. He was convinced that people talk too much and listen too little, yet was warm, approachable, and absolutely loved by any and all he met.

When asked how he was doing, until his last breath, his answer never changed:

"Fantastic".

Victorian shoe I bought from Paris 1900 decades ago



Parke had a positive "can do" attitude his entire life. To him nothing was impossible.

Above: *It seems that Toccata for Toy Trains was created by Eames out of a love of toys and the marvel of their construction. **Parke Meek** was the cinematographer. I've heard Billy Wilder helped push some of the trains around. Music composed by Elmer Bernstein.*