

How much is that plasmosphere in the window?
Parke Meek of Jadis Moderne.



WEIRD SCIENCE

*Santa Monica's
rest home for
robots sells out
to Hollywood*

By John Cade

A MAN AND woman stop to peer through the large storefront window at a mannequin in a lab coat and goggles sitting beside a life-size Frankenstein reclined on a brocade-upholstered chaise lounge. The monster is wired to a bank of devices that look as if they've been cannibalized from some art deco power station.

The two move toward the entrance but stop at the door, hesitant to enter. Maybe it's because there's no sign saying the place is open to the public . . . or maybe it's the bolt of lightning

JOSEPH VILES

shooting across the foyer.

Inside, Parke Meek is hunkered over a varnished wood console studded with dials, plugs and wires. He winches up a hand crank, checks several gauges, then throws a switch. A blue-white arc of electricity leaps between two silver globes with the thunderous crackle of a car battery being shorn in two.

The couple flees, and a satisfied Meek settles in with a February 1924 issue of *Science and Invention*.

Welcome to Jadis Moderne, a bizarre little store that specializes in antiquated mechanical devices: onepioneer communications instruments, obsolete scientific apparatuses, archaic business equipment. Just a couple of doors down from Santa Monica's Chinois on Main, the place is an anomaly among the trendy boutiques that line the street, a Jules Verne vision of the future—which, in a sense, is the present. Not our present, mind you, but some long dead seer's speculation of what the 20th century might have looked like.

Meek, the proprietor, thinks the term *jadis moderne* is French for "from the past." He's wrong. It means "to speak modern," and that confusing etymology is what the shop—and Meek himself—is all about.

He looks as if he's just walked off the set of a '50s sci-fi movie. At 70, Meek's mad scientist's white frizzle has retreated from the top of his head, leaving his exposed pate the color and texture of boiled shrimp. He wears pince-nez, which dig deeply into the loose folds on the bridge of his nose. He talks in excited spurts, gesturing wildly to make his point. While recounting a recent conversation with a customer about Copernicus, he waves his hands about so haphazardly that he comes precariously close to bashing an 80-year-old working model of

OUTER LIMITS

Earth, the sun and the moon.

Jadis Moderne hasn't always been a rest home for robots. Meek used to sell vintage furniture and reproductions, which he built in his shop. One day he found himself talking a customer out of ordering a dining set. "I'd have had to build it from scratch," he says. "I just didn't feel like it. I was bored."

With that, he sold off everything. It took three years, but by the beginning of 1990, he'd unloaded the last of the store's inventory. In a serendipitous development that Meek himself is hard-pressed to explain, within three weeks he had accumulated 35 vintage microphones, and within three months he owned 150 period typewriters and a cache of other gizmos.

"I didn't make a conscious decision to collect antique machines," he says. "I bought a few old typewriters and started to learn about them. Then I

found a couple of old microphones and discovered there was this entire world out there. Somehow I realized it was the direction I was heading."

Meek stocked up on old, basic-black rotary telephones, the kind with a satisfying heft to the receiver. He acquired cathedral-arched radios of polished walnut and Bakelite ones that look like they were carved from cream cheese. And no imports, either: Airline, Admiral, RCA and Radiola. He picked up a portable dental drill at a Venice swap meet, an old ammeter at the UCLA salvage yard and a thermostat ("accurate up to 2,000 degrees!" he says) pirated from a friend's kiln.

"I started out simple," Meek says. "Now we're getting pretty high voltage." He steps over a coil of power cables to a device that looks like a set of crude rabbit ears—two 10-inch rods emanating from a flat base. It's a Ja-

cob's ladder, a contrivance for conducting experiments on electrical current. He plugs it in, and a hairline thread of electricity appears between the rods. It hovers at the bottom for a moment, then, as in any good Frankenstein movie, crawls upward. At the top, that arc bursts like a soap bubble and another appears at the bottom.

Meek points to a seven-foot version of the appliance. "That one pulls more juice than an electric chair. When I hooked it up, it kept blowing fuses in the building. I finally had to patch it directly into the fuse box."

Nearby, a stream of protons waltzes inside what looks like an enormous pickle jar. Delicate, almost feminine tendrils of purple light play off a tiny silver ball, seeking the edge of the glass. This plasmosphere, as it's called, is really just a faux antique version of the electric objets d'art sold at gadget stores like the Sharper Image.



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It's one of the few modern items at Jadis. “Larry Albright, a local sculptor, made it for a commercial with Vincent Price,” he says.

The fact that the plasmosphere is the perfect Vincent Price accoutrement, or that the transformer next to it looks amazingly like Robbie the Robot from *Forbidden Planet* isn't lost on Meek. He generates a hefty percentage of his income renting props. “It's a great way to make money and avoid paying taxes,” he says with a smirk that would make Price himself proud. “With the money I earn I buy more stuff—no capital gains. Plus, I get my machine back.”

Meek's widgets have made cameos in *RoboCop 2* and *Doogie Howser, M.D.*, among others, and he's currently restoring an old telephone switchboard for use in a Disney film, though he usually doesn't know—or, for that matter, care—which films his props appear in, an attitude that in L.A. borders on impiety. And don't look for him in any Industry sourcebook either, or even the Yellow Pages. “I don't advertise,” Meek says. “If you're listed with the trade, you get calls all day long. I don't want to be party to all that. If you want something from me, just come on down.”

Technically, everything in the shop is for sale—sort of like the Brooklyn Bridge is for sale. But aside from the radios and telephones, there are no price tags. Ask Meek how much, and you'll get the same answer every time: “Too damn much.”

He intentionally prices his more exotic machines higher than he thinks anyone is willing to pay. Take the McIntosh electrical stimulator, for example, an uncanny double for the device that jump-starts the she-monster in *Bride of Frankenstein*. Stainless-steel knobs are set into its dark-wood base. Atop, a black cylinder rises through a series of chrome rings. A rubber hose from one side attaches to an arm band, which attaches to the patient. Meek rents it for \$2,000 a week—he'll sell it for \$10,000.

Until recently, Meek would open and close the shop at whim, but just because the door was open didn't

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mean you'd get service. On one Saturday afternoon, almost a dozen people milled about. One customer waited with a telephone in one hand, a credit card in the other, but Meek was nowhere to be found. A boy of about four approached the counter to ask, "Is there anyone who runs this shop?"

"I don't care if they come in," Meek says. "I don't even care if they buy anything. I do it because I like it. If other people enjoy it, fine. I don't begrudge them that."

But Meek runs hot and cold. Currently, a sign hanging above the door reads: RENTAL PROPS ONLY. It could just as easily read KEEP OUT. "People would come in here and stay for an hour and a half," Meek says, "and it got on my nerves, so I just decided to go with the rentals."

Through mail-order sales of staple merchandise alone—radios (\$50 to \$150), telephones (\$110) and re-

production deco barstools (\$80), Meek says, "We probably do enough business to pay the rent," though it's unclear who "we" are in this one-man operation. "I'm not here to make money. I'm on social security. If I make too much, they'll take it out of my check."

You might say Meek is doing what he was born to do. Back in grade school, his best friend was Sammy Levine. Sammy's dad was a junk dealer, and Sammy had to schlepp a pushcart all over Fort Wayne, Indiana, before and after school scrounging for scrap metal. Having his friend along made the job almost bearable; Meek, on the other hand, loved it.

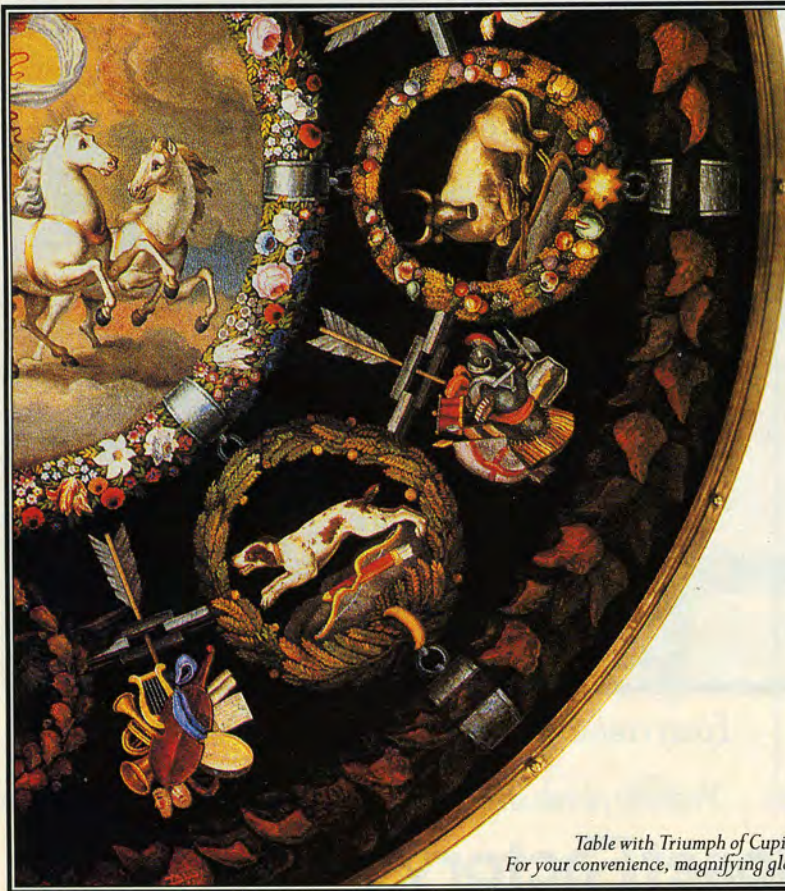
"I just liked alleys," Meek says. "I'd find great things in the trash: glassware, china, an old set of balance scales. People were throwing out the old Victorian stuff because everyone

was going modern. We had a big old house, and I just stuck everything I found up in the attic."

That "junk" stayed in his parents' attic through World War II, while Meek fought in the Battle of Guadalcanal. After the war, he came home to Fort Wayne, married a girl named Eris Jean and opened an antique shop.

A few years later, as a marine reservist stationed with a carpentry unit at Camp Pendleton, Meek took it upon himself to call up legendary furniture designer Charles Eames at his Venice studio and ask for a tour. The meeting would later pay off when in 1951 Meek phoned up Eames again and asked for a job—and got it.

Then it was back to California, where for the next 25 years, Meek rendered in wood what Eames had rendered in imagination. "Mr. Eames was always vague in his instructions," Meek says. "He'd say, 'I want a down-



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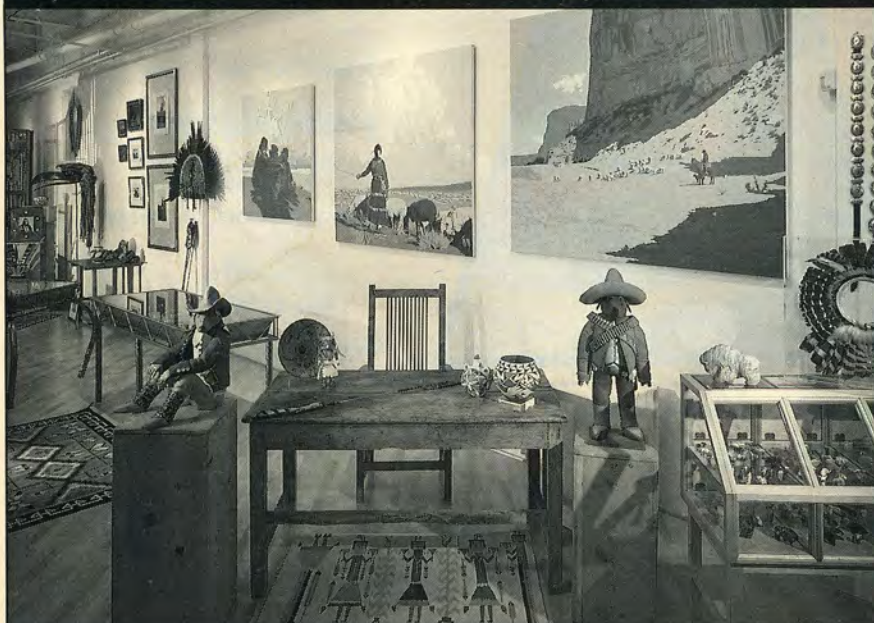


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filled, contemporary version of the old club chair.' After we built a few variations, he'd come back, pick out the one he liked, then make adjustments: 'How about a lower angle here, and maybe a curve there.' "

When Meek opened his own vintage-furniture store in 1976, he sought pieces with the Eames sensibility. "I cleaned out every used-office-supply store in San Diego, Los Angeles and San Francisco," he says. "When I ran out of stuff, I started building my own."

The Machine Age merchandise Meek sells today is also Eames-inspired, though a lot of his inventory looks pretty complicated. "There's a lot of form here, but most of it began with function," he says, pointing to a shelving unit full of old radios. "That one on the top shelf is the earliest one. It's just a simple wooden box. You turn a dial, and it works." He picks up a white model with a plastic bubble for a face. "Then they got carried away and *designed* the thing."

Meek's own designs for living are strictly utilitarian. A widower with one son, he sleeps on a mattress atop some industrial shelving in the warehouse behind his shop. "You know how old my kid is?" he asks. "He's 47. My god, he's an old fart. But he's nothing like me—he's normal."

When the plasmosphere goes on the blink, Meek gets up and pokes into its guts, oblivious to gawking customers. After a few minutes, he plugs it back in. It works, though he can't say exactly what it was he did. He touches the glass globe, and the light licks at his fingers. It almost appears as if the electricity is emanating from his hands.

Meek picks up his *Science and Invention* and points to the picture on the cover—a man with a fishbowl helmet and a jet pack, streaking across the sky. "Isn't that great?" he says. "These old issues always have something like this on the cover, or some huge aircraft with 70 motors and tennis courts on the wings. Today, *Popular Science* will have some plastic car. It just doesn't excite your imagination the way it used to." ■