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Author(s): Gordon, N.

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BCG Study Trip - Vienna

13-16th November 1997

Its November so it must be time for the BCG study trip to foreign climes. A break with tradition (does two years running make a tradition?) led to a bleary-eyed group assembling at Heathrow Terminal 2 instead of Waterloo Eurostar Terminal. A laughing and joking group then boarded Austrian Airlines flight OS452 bound for Vienna and strapped themselves into their seats ready for take-off. Two hours later we all laughed and joked as we finally took off after passenger miscounts and nosecone problems delayed departure.

After arriving and installing ourselves in the Hotel Post in the Stephansdom quarter the usual sightseeing and hostelry visiting ensued.

The next day a short tram ride across town took us to the Museum. The Museum of Natural History is set in the same grounds as the Kunsthistorisches Museum (Museum of Fine Arts) and is almost a mirror image. Construction began in 1871 and the museum opened in 1889. While almost identical outside to the Fine Art Museum, the museums differ by their interior decor, reflecting

the nature of the collections.

A welcome address and introduction outlining the history of the buildings and collections was followed by tours of the different collections.

Botany Tour

The herbarium was divided over two floors due to pressure of space. The collections were arranged alphabetically by psuche cryptograms, ferns and vascular plants up to Leguminosae on the upper floor and the Leguminosae onwards downstairs. Staff comprised of 4 botanists and 4 technicians with a heavy reliance on volunteers.

The museum had an active collecting policy but obtained most of its material by exchange with 50 other institutions, concentrating on Mediterranean, Middle East and North African material.

Downstairs the collections were housed in wooden cabinets which had an extensive overflow of material to be accessioned stored on top of them. Herbarium sheets were stored in folders in uniformed size boxes with drop fronts. The boxes were not purpose built or made from conservation grade material but bought off the peg from a stationary supplier which was the first shock

of the day. The second came when asked about pest control. The collections were

fumigated twice a year using a mix of dichlorvos and permethryn using a fogger/mister. This was carried out on the entomology section's advice and the fumigant used was a compromise because "we are not allowed to use efficient poisons"! Previously they had been using DDT!

Leaving the downstairs section, being careful not to disturb and the layers of dust we made our way upstairs to the recently refurbished botany section. Here the collections are housed on a new roller racking system using the same boxes as downstairs. The conversation then turned to funding, were we heard the familiar tale of government indifference and threats of huge cuts to palpable empathy around the room.

Directors Talk

After coffee and strudel we were then given a talk by the museum Director on the history of the collections and the future direction he would like to see the museum taking. After describing how much of the display taxidermy is 80-90 years old. He then went on to decry the move of museums into multimedia at the expense of real

objects; "how can virtual reality do it.. its an illusion, a manipulated image with no link to the real world". It was further expounded that this type of 'nature' exists within the realms of the BBC and National Geographic and should museums be going down this road? This was not some Luddite rant against technology but sought to place objects at the heart of the museum, a plea for "well stuffed museums, not just well stuffed objects". The following demonstration of using a microscope to generate 3D images of live specimens sought to demonstrate how 'hi-tech' is a tool to be used not a be-all-and-end-all; a point well made.

Lepidoptera Tour

The entomology section staff has 8 staff and 4 technicians with specialists in the areas of Lepidoptera, Coleoptera, Diptera, Hemiptera and Neuroptera.

The Lepidoptera collections were arranged systematically by geographical area and comprised over 2.5 million specimens with over 20,000 genital preparations. Collections were stored in drawers in a mix of wooden cabinets, metal racking and storeboxes of mixed materials. Some of which were non-conservation standard, such as

the cabinet housing the genital preparations, which was made out of fibreboard. Like most of the collections, parts of the store were quite new, though some odd choices of materials had been made, including an external blinds system which was only designed for internal use and they had subsequently found that it could not be opened and closed properly.

Palaeontology Tour

The palaeontology section was split into two main stores and a preparation/conservation lab. The original store houses the collection systematically in wooden cabinets. Type and figured material are incorporated into the main sequence. Not surprisingly, the collections were strongest in Austrian material but there was also active collection from other countries.

A new store had been developed in the basement, and as with the other disciplines, there had been a move towards using roller racking with some fixed shelving. The roller racking supported cabinets with interchangeable drawers so they could mix and match according to the size of the specimens. Problems had been encountered however with the drawers tipping when opened. Space had been

allowed for expansion of the collection within this store, whereas the old store in the main museum was full to capacity.

The preparation/conservation laboratory was well equipped including air abrasive units, a large box vacuum chamber, rock cutting machinery and fume cupboards, and was staffed by two full-time technicians.

One of the main current projects was a new display in the fossil galleries, which were closed to the public during our visit. New case lighting was being installed and specimen selection was still going on, with some material being brought in especially for the new display. Some objects were in the gallery which this group were privileged to see, including a giant leaf fossil and some impressive marine reptiles fossils.

The palaeontology library had also been installed on new roller racking to make best use of limited space. There was a problem however with smaller books falling through the sides of the shelves.

Ornithology Tour

The birds constitute some of the oldest collections held by the museum, including Johann

Natterer the Elder's collection of 600 birds amassed by his falconer. The collections have been progressively built up and now take over almost all of the ground floor storage area. The collections were somewhere in the magnitude of 150,000 specimens with the skins collection alone containing over 100,000 specimens including 12,000 Brazilian bird skins.

There are two full time staff, one working exclusively on Venezuelan Rainforest birds and a librarian who also functions as a technician. The museum employs three taxidermists which the bird section had claim to half the time of. The bulk of the collection is stored in wooden cabinets in a tray system within wooden drawers. As with the herbarium, the trays were not acid-free. Some of the drawers and trays were very crowded though with space at a premium throughout the museum this was unavoidable. As with other sections the collections were fumigated twice a year. Again they had no pest problems.

The museum is still actively collecting, and when queried on this, the curator gave a robust defence of the museums policy of shooting specimens for the collection.

Museum Displays

I found the displays of the museum were after a while very disheartening. As the Director had said, the vast majority of the displays had not been touched for 80-90 years and this became very apparent as you walked through the displays. Galleries were arranged taxonomically, with the geology and anthropology galleries downstairs and zoology upstairs.

Almost all objects were displayed in cabinets on a shelving system, with almost none of

cases having internal lighting. Cases and objects were illuminated by natural daylight and a mixture of electric lights, primarily used for gallery and not specimen illumination.

Many specimens were badly faded especially those close to windows. There was no labelling beyond a common name and Latin name for each specimen.


Despite there being an incredible diversity of well prepared specimens, gallery after gallery of ranks of specimen was very wearing, and you found yourself almost walking straight through galleries and not taking very much in. The exception to this was the children's galleries which had a

similar approach to the Natural History Centre at Liverpool and Bolton, with many interactives, hands on material and some live specimens. The problems with the displays had been identified by the Director during his talk but with little political will to fund redisplay work, the museum is facing real problems. While the Director was keen to take the museum forward as a more public oriented institution, directing more resources towards exhibitions, education and schools, this was not shared by some of the curators. This conflict between scientific and social purpose is a significant difficulty facing the museum.

Thanks must go again to Kathie Way for organising another succesful and illuminating BCG trip. Long may they continue.

Nick Gordon

Buckinghamshire County Museum



Archives - Museum of Natural History Vienna

The complete written and pictorial documentation of the Museum's history from its beginnings to the present day are catalogued here. It is not only items on paper which are held here, historical artefacts such as early typewriters used and old instruments used in microscopic preparation by Emperor Francis I, the founder of the museum are housed. A new compactorised storage system (1995) holds the collection. The system is made of wood and it was noted that this was purchased due to its slow burning time in the event of a fire; the contents would not be heated as quickly as would with a metal system. Inside the cabinets all the paper items are stored in acid-free boxes which are capable of absorbing water in the event of flood damage. A paper conservator is employed who monitors all materials used within Archives, but has little involvement with archive standards adopted by curatorial departments.

The department also holds a collection of videos depicting and recording temporary exhibitions and events held in the museum. As the stability of the tape material

can not yet be measured, they will have to be periodically checked and copied again if necessary.

One of the interesting botanical holds was a bound volume of 'Flora from the Yellowstone' (Park), a gift to the museum from the Arch Deacon Ferdennand. I was intrigued to find that unlike most herbaria the historical material had been removed from the Botany department and placed within Archives. It was explained that the material was not scientific material, of no taxonomic value and therefore was not to be curated. No historical research is carried out by the curators. The material was by no means stored and forgotten about. The herbarium sheets were stored in a fridge in the basement of the museum along with other sensitive material such as the photographic collection. Some of the sheets where in print-type cut mounts from when they had been used for exhibition. The sheets (mainly cultivated plants from the Emperors' garden) had not been remounted but left on their original sheets to illustrate the historical aspect of early herbaria.

Once a month an open day, "*Jour Fixe*" der Abteilung Archiv, is held. Here an individual collector and their collections are

concentrated on. Associated material from the archive department such as note books and collecting artefacts from expeditions are displayed, along with specimens collected. The next event to take place after we arrived was an open day on Ida Pfeiffer (1797-1858), a zoologist, botanist and ethnographer. The day was also intended to mark the 200 years since her birth.

Donna Hughes
Liverpool Museum

