

Chicago Natural History Museum

FOUNDED BY MARSHALL FIELD, 1893

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THE FIRST MUSEUMS OF NATURAL HISTORY

MUSEUMS, I believe, had their origins in somewhat diverse human interests—one in the collection of curiosities, another in the accumulation of mementoes and of “trophies of the chase,” and certainly still another in the search for medicinal plants and other substances to be used in medicine. In the fourth century B.C., Aristotle had already accumulated the nucleus of a museum collection. He certainly displayed the catholic curiosity about the world around him that characterizes the museum naturalist. The prototype of the “museum expedition” may perhaps be discerned in the by-product of “specimens” from the invasions of Alexander the Great, who sent back strange animals and other objects to his greater teacher for study and description.

The periods of the Roman Empire and of the Dark Ages intervened between Aristotle's pioneer investigations of nature and the renewal of interest in natural history that came with the multilateral expansion of the human spirit in the Renaissance—say beginning with the invention of printing in Europe about the year 1440. The barrenness of Roman times in the development of natural history is well illustrated by the wholly uncritical *Natural History* of Pliny, in which mythology is inextricably interwoven with fact, with no

thought of examining actual animals or plants. The mediaeval contribution to natural history was an even less significant melange of curious facts and misinformation. Aristotle's beginnings of observational description became fixed dogma, so that when Aristotle had given an erroneous figure for the number of teeth in the horse, his statement was regarded as quite refuting any mere attempt to recount them from an actual skull.

By the end of the 16th century considerable strides had been made in the accumulation of museum specimens, mainly dried animals and parts of animals, dried plants, and rocks and minerals. Four volumes of Aldrovandi's *Natural History* had appeared by the time of his death in 1605, and the work was continued by his students at the University of Bologna. It is noteworthy that Aldrovandi's published work was based on accumulated collections; much of this material is still to be seen at Bologna, and the Aldrovandian Museum may well be thought of as the first museum of natural history worthy of the name.

During the centuries of the Renaissance, along with the development of secular art collections and the renewed establishment of libraries, the custom had developed of maintaining cabinets of curios or cabinets of natural history that became fashionable at every court in Europe, a fashion imitated by wealthy merchants in succeeding centuries. This mode of origin of modern museums has left its stamp in the prefix of “royal” in the names of so many European museums.

The “cabinets of curios,” by their emphasis on mere miscellanies of curious objects, of freaks and oddities, which could astonish and amuse or even horrify, but could scarcely instruct, exercised a most pernicious retarding influence on the developments of education and research. The origin of the great national and municipal museums, and of the systematic description of nature based on more permanent collections, comes in the succeeding centuries.

Turning back to another of the principal roots of the museum of natural history, we must recall the use of skins for clothing and bedding, of horns as drinking vessels, and of bones and antlers as tools by our more remote European ancestors. The love of hunting still so strong in modern man is not difficult to understand, the more so with the prestige lent to the chase by royalty throughout the rise of civilization in Europe. One of the first notable historical uses of hunting trophies, almost, at least, with the modern idea of instruction, may be seen in the mounted skins of the two types of European wild oxen, the aurochs and bison, set up in his hall by the Freiherr von Heberstein about the year 1550. Von Heberstein had been enormously impressed by the imposing size of these great animals, whose skins and skulls he had brought

—THIS MONTH'S COVER—

A 20th-century airplane-view of a 13th-century village of prehistoric American Indians is shown on our cover. It is a site in New Mexico excavated during the past summer by the Museum's Southwest Archaeological Expedition under the direction of Dr. Paul S. Martin, Chief Curator of Anthropology. Seven of the fourteen rooms that were opened up may be seen. From them the expedition recovered a wealth of artifacts which, when fitted in place with the findings of eighteen past seasons of Southwest digging, are filling in gaps in the jigsaw puzzle of reconstructing the history and cultural attainments of an extinct tribe designated by the name Mogollon. The photograph was made at an altitude of about 1,000 feet above ground by James Barter during a flight in the private airplane of Dr. Lester H. Keys.

from the forests of Poland to Vienna. These animals had formerly ranged over most of Europe. By the time of Julius Caesar they had become extinct in France—he reports the aurochs as the “urus” of the Teutonic forests, “but little smaller than elephants.”

During the Middle Ages the range of both bison and aurochs had been steadily restricted so that they were no longer widely known, and even the radical differences between them came to be forgotten. Thus the Heberstein exhibit parallels attempts of modern museums to preserve for public instruction the specimens of the animals that have become rare or extinct in historic times. The vast collections of heads and horns to be seen in many museums, often inherited by them from the “trophy rooms” of private individuals, attest to the long continuance of the hunting trophy as a source of museum material. Even the most progressive of museums bear evident traces of the patronage of the “big game hunter.” The integration of such specimens into the modern museum is a late development.

The story of the search for medicinal plants and its effect on the development of the science of botany is a fascinating chapter in the history of science in general and of the botanical museum.

KARL P. SCHMIDT
Chief Curator of Zoology

Japanese Prince Visits Museum

Prince Akihito of Japan was a Museum visitor during his stopover in Chicago on his recent tour of the United States.



Schmidt, Karl Patterson. 1953. "The First Museums of Natural History."
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