

# Museums at the crossroad: Contributing to dialogue, curiosity and wonder in natural history museums

Antonio G. Valdecasas <sup>\*</sup>, Virginia Correia, Ana M. Correias

*Museo Nacional de Ciencias Naturales, c/Jose Gutierrez Abascal, 2, 28006 Madrid, Spain*

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## Abstract

The first natural history collections opened to the public were inspired by a sense of curiosity and wonder about the products of nature. They were ‘cabinets of curiosities’ that offered a first-hand interaction between owner and visitors. Nowadays, these two facets of the museum experience—dialogue and wonder—have been lost, in part, due to the information overload coming via the media and the impersonal nature of the museum visit. This paper offers some reflections on the evolution of the museum visit, suggests some ways to rediscover this ‘sense of wonder’ and provides ideas on how to promote two-way communication with museum visitors. Two examples of exhibitions are offered as illustrations of the points discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

The first public museums exhibited animals, plants and objects of human or natural origin that were new and unknown to their visitors (Whitehead, 1970). Visiting a museum was an event full of discovery. Not knowing what was on display, and being confronted with completely unknown objects and organisms, opened up new worlds for visitors—a reflection of the purpose behind those early exhibitions.

Until that time, natural history collections had primarily been the property of wealthy aristocrats or dedicated naturalists. Some of their collections were monographic, containing only plants or a single kind of animal such as molluscs or butterflies, although it was more common to

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<sup>\*</sup> Corresponding author. Tel.: +34 91 4 111328; fax: +34 91 5 645078.

E-mail address: [valdeca@mncn.csic.es](mailto:valdeca@mncn.csic.es) (A.G. Valdecasas).

collect a wide variety of objects such as plants, animals, monstrosities, minerals, ‘unclassifiable’ productions of nature, and human artefacts. Underlying these collections was the desire to foster curiosity and wonder about the diversity of things created by nature (Findlen, 1994).

Notable collections, such as the one assembled by Peter the Great for his Petrograd Museum, usually had several origins. Peter bought the anatomical collection of the Dutch anatomist Ruysch, as well as the Seba collection of animals of the East Indies (Massie, 1980). He also contributed some original specimens sent to him by different agents that were explicitly instructed to collect, among other things, ‘strange or interesting items’ (Heesen, 2000). The ‘sense of wonder’ attached to these collections is clearly revealed in Peter’s galleries, where a living human with a genetic anomaly known as ‘lobster extremities’ was shown to the amazement of visitors (Asma, 2001). The anatomical and natural history collections of the British surgeon Hunter, and others, were primarily motivated by this same sense of wonder and scientific curiosity (Asma, 2001). These sensations, plus personal discovery, may have been a leitmotif to visitors, but they were also a driving force behind the building of these collections, along with the germ of modern scientific thinking (Fig. 1).

But even before those natural history museums, there were ‘cabinets of curiosities’ that, although not open to the general public, were well known among the wealthy and cultivated. Cabinets like those of King Frederick III in Copenhagen, Ferrante Imperato in Naples, and Aldrovandi in Bologna (Daston & Park, 1998) are good examples of that initial germ that culminates with the opening of the museums. Some of these cabinets or collections (such as the one belonging to Pedro Franco Dávila, which was sold at an auction in Paris in 1771 and was the beginning of the Spanish National Natural History Museum) went on to constitute an important part of the initial collections of some present day museums (Barreiro, 1992).

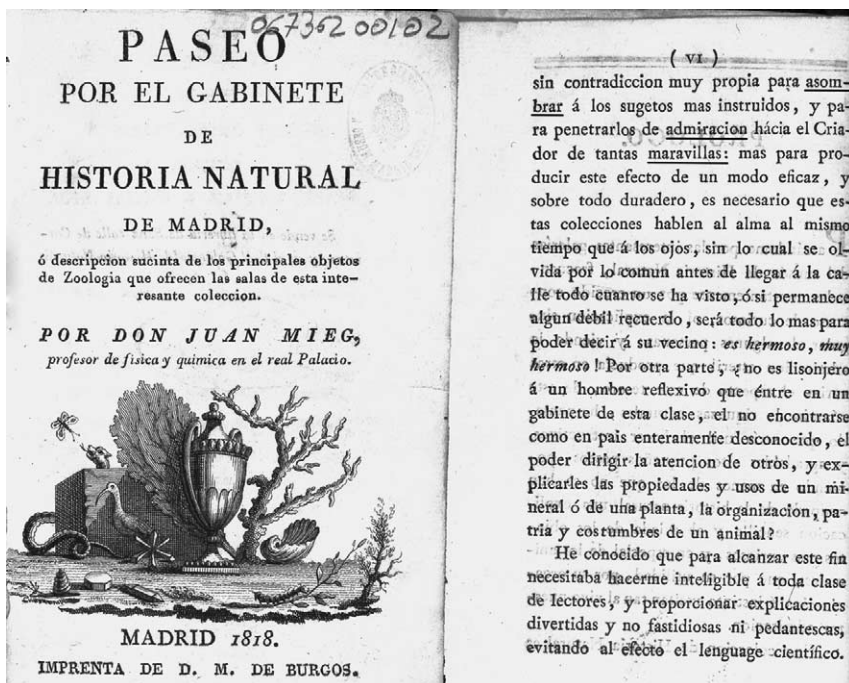


Fig. 1. The first guide of the Spanish Natural History Museum, where it is stressed the sense of ‘wonder’.

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