

“Exotism” on display at La Specola Museum

Gianna Innocenti

Museo di Storia Naturale dell'Università

degli Studi di Firenze

gianna.innocenti@unifi.it

Keywords

*Natural History
Museums,
La Specola,
natural curiosities*

Abstract

In Florence, “La Specola” Museum was first opened to the public in 1775, by order of the enlightened Grand Duke Peter Leopold of Lorraine who wished to put together all the “natural curiosities” from his collections, as well as from the Medici ones, in the context of an enlightened project of popular education. The zoological collections consisted of many Italian and foreign specimens, and among them on display were several amazing animals, peculiar for their provenance, rarity or dimension that gave rise to the social imagination of the Museum visitors.

This paper provides a selection of the unusual animals on display and gives an account of their arrival at La Specola Museum as many specimens have a “story” to tell the visitor.

Introduction

The Florentine Museum “La Specola” was founded in 1771 as the Royal Imperial Museum of Physics and Natural History, by order of the Grand Duke Peter Leopold of Lorraine. It was his aim to reunite all the material related to natural history, i.e. “natural curiosities”, scientific artefacts and instruments, from the Medici collections, separating them from the art collections held in the Uffizi and Pitti Palace, for the cultural enrichment of the town. In fact, the museum was organized under the direction of the chemist and physiologist Felice Fontana, following the catalogue of material compiled in 1763 by Giovanni Targioni Tozzetti. The museum was finally opened to the public of any social level on the 21st

of February, 1775 (Barbagli 2009:58; Contardi 2009:15). In the subsequent years, the Museum became a well known place for the Florentine people, so much so that it was simply and popularly known as “La Specola”. The name “Specola” was for the astronomical observatory located in its tower, which was built in 1789 (Miniati 1984:212), and soon developed into a town institution. It was visited not only by Florentines but also by country people, who wished to see the amazing collection of odd specimens housed in it, such as horrific reptiles, colourful birds and huge mammals (Corsini 1924:377; Azzaroli Puccetti 1972:94). Importantly, La Specola was the first strictly monographic scientific museum opened to the public, regardless of

their status. This was quite a change from other collections, such as the sixteenth and seventeenth century Wunderkammern, whose displays of exotic objects and specimens were for the exclusive viewing of the nobility (Strocchi 2004:83–84). Indeed, Fontana and the subsequent directors of the Museum prepared the museum with self-education purposes, wishing to join up all the branches of the scientific knowledge of the time in the field of the Natural Sciences and aspiring to affirm a model of organization able to answer to the dual need of a rational reordering of the collections and an enlightened demonstration of the true and useful. The museum's model was characterized by its propensity of showing all the specimens available, with an emphasis towards displaying strange, rare and foreign materials, stressing their unusualness for their provenance, donor or peculiarity.

With regard to the zoological aspects of the collection, specimens were displayed in relation to their taxonomic classification, with the intention of displaying many representatives of all groups in the animal kingdom, as followed the Enlightenment ideas and the diffusion of the systematic studies throughout biology (Cipriani 2006:100). One exception to this however, was the antique nucleus of the Medici's "*studiolo*" collection, which was abundant in precious, filled with singular and splendid pieces (for the time). This collection was maintained largely intact, although the sense of marvellous went to the rank of "infancy of ideas", which the Enlighten scientists like Fontana felt they could "censure" (Lugli 1983:111), putting them in their hierarchical and scientific category – an example for all, the "unicorn horn" was properly recognized to be the incisor tooth of a narwhal (*Monodon monoceros*) and was

therefore properly placed among the mammals.

In the mid-19th century, Italy was a newborn and developing nation and colonialism was at its dawn. During this time, the exhibits and collections mainly included the creation of the Central Collection of Italian Vertebrates, that contained the most complete collection of the Italian specimens, the exotic specimens were largely included in this as well, due to the passion of remote and far *chinoiserie* engendered in museum visitors (Strocchi 2004:83; Barbagli 2009:71–72; Martinelli et al. 2009:47). Indeed, during the latter half of the 19th century and particularly in the years following the unification of Italy, the natural history collections became an instrument to affirm the authority of a nation and represented the palpable sign of the capacity to intellectually dominate remote places (Barbagli 2008:35).

In the following sections of this article I provide an *excursus* on some examples of the zoological specimens displayed through the years, with an emphasis on "exotism" as it was meant at that time, i.e. intending everything that arrives from distant countries, or every specimen that has the quality of being alien or not native, or curious.

Specimens from the Medici's collection

There are still a few specimens from the Medici's Wunderkammern collection on display at La Specola. These are specimens that predate the Museum's formal foundation. Among them, one of the most ancient specimens, still on display in a Museum hall, is the skeleton of an Indian elephant (Fig. 1) that was kept alive and exhibited to the Florentine people in the Loggia dei Lanzi, near Palazzo Vecchio in Florence until 1655, the year of its death (Agnelli et al. 2009:204).

It has been studied in recent times by the English scholar R. Avery, who provided us the following preliminary information.



Fig. 1 – The skeleton of the Indian elephant (Elephas maximus). Photo by Saulo Bambi.

The elephant, born in 1630, travelled all over Europe. It was sketched by Rembrandt in Holland in 1637, and was likely seen in life by Bernini in Rome. Following this it arrived in Florence, where it expired in November 1655. Following the orders of the Grand-duke that it be used for scientific studies, it was dragged to the Boboli Gardens and was flayed, so that its skin could be stuffed and mounted realistically, and its skeleton re-assembled for additional investigation. Both items were initially displayed in the Salone delle Pietre dure in the Pitti Palace.

In one of the first inventories of the collection, compiled at the end of the eighteenth century by Giovanni Targioni Tozzetti for the Royal Galleries, the collections of Georg Everhard Rumpf (1627–1702) are mentioned and listed. These were purchased by the Grand Duke Cosimo II de' Medici. This collection was exhibited in the Museum and consisted of exotic specimens from the Indonesian island of Amboina. Among the specimens were rare and precious invertebrates, such as the mollusc shell of the *Nautilus* and the black coral *Antipathes*, which was listed among the marine plants (Innocenti & Cianfanelli 2009:135).

In the catalogue compiled in 1792, several specimens of aegagropile and bezoar are reported (Fig. 2). Aegagropile are fur balls found in the rumen of deer or other ruminants, and bezoar are mineral concretions from the kidneys and bladders of herbivores. In previous centuries these were used in ancient pharmacological remedies as a cure for fevers or against plagues. These pieces were kept not only for their rarity but also for their presumed hidden healing powers, for examples as antidotes. However even though they were part of the old Medici's collections, they were nevertheless listed in the zoological register, thereby properly recognizing their animal origin. The catalogue also reports a bezoar from the gall bladder of the Palatine Elector extracted the 9th of June 1716, a piece that is unfortunately lost (Innocenti & Poggesi 2002:14–15).

The hippopotamus, still displayed in a Museum room, was originally part of the collections of the Museum of Natural Curiosities of the Uffizi Gallery, however its complete history remains quite uncertain. It was probably donated to the Grand Duke Peter Leopold around the second half



Fig. 2 – A selection of bezoar and aegagropiles with their original labels. Photo by Saulo Bambi.

of the 1700s and lived in the Boboli Gardens, but there are also accounts that it lived in the menagerie of Boboli Gardens during the reign of Cosimo III de' Medici (1670–1723) (Thorsen 2006: 272).

First explorations of exotic sites

Significant quantities of exotic specimens were brought back to the museum from early explorations of foreign and far sites. These expeditions, organized by the Grand-dukes of Tuscany, were with the precise scope of enriching the collections and exhibits, to provide the museum a complete and documented inventory of Nature. For example, in 1817 the Grand Duke Ferdinand III sponsored an expedition to Brazil, where the botanist and museum attendant Giuseppe Raddi collected more than 3,000 insects. In 1828–29 Leopold II funded Raddi and Champollion's expedition to Egypt, from which they brought back several hundred specimens to La Specola, including the mummy of a Nile crocodile, which is still on exhibit in the Reptilian room of the museum (Barbagli 2009:62).

Organised explorations of remote lands

In 1860, the Royal Institute of Advanced Studies was established; the precursor of the current University. At this time the Museum was intended to serve a privileged place of education, with its collections organized in laboratories and the specimens placed at the service of research and teaching. From that time on, there was a large increase in the number of specimens housed in the museum. The largest portion of material was collected after the second half of the nineteenth century, due to the efforts of Adolfo Targioni Tozzetti (1823–1902) and Enrico Hillyer Giglioli (1845–1909). Targioni Tozzetti greatly expanded the invertebrate collection while Giglioli the vertebrate collection. Both also re-ordered and expanded the older collections in order to create specific Italian collections. As part of their museum activity, they also participated in numerous national and international exhibitions including the International Exhibition in London in 1862; the Paris Universal Exposition of 1867; the Fisheries Exhibitions of Vienna and Berlin in 1873 and 1880, respectively. These exhibitions were not only occasions to demonstrate the activity of the museum, but also opportunities to purchase or exchange exotic and rare specimens with Italian, European and overseas institutions, as for example embassies and consulates.

To contribute to the development of the Museum, travelling to foreign and remote countries became an increasing "trend", and from 1865 till 1910 ca. several explorations in distant lands were organized and completed. This followed the tendency of other European institutions at the time (Rice 2000:290).

The Florentine naturalist Odoardo Beccari, beginning at the age of 23 and continuing several years (until 1880), trav-

elled throughout Indonesia (Borneo, Sarawak, Sulawesi), Papua New Guinea, Malaysia, Eritrea and numerous islands in Oceania. His expeditions were funded by the Italian Museums and also by La Specola. During these trips he collected rare specimens that he prepared for the displays at La Specola. His adventurous travels inspired the Italian writer Emilio Salgari, the author of the exotic character of *Sandokan*. Much important material was collected during various expeditions during this time, including on the cruises of the vessels “Magenta”, “Washington” and “Vettor Pisani”, to name a few. These expeditions often lasted years, circumnavigating the globe or visiting distant lands, and their participants faced difficulties and discomforts, bringing back not only natural history materials (the local faunas and floras), but also ethnological specimens. Travelling in foreign countries and collecting ethnological or anthropological materials served to bring into focus man’s place in Nature, as reported by the anthropologist Paolo Mantegazza in the foreword of the report on the steam corvette “Magenta” travel (Landucci 1977:142). Increasingly, these voyages reported on the different ways of living observed in exotic human populations. Naturally, these were compared to European culture and civilization, which was discussed and criticized (Landucci 1977:225).

Beyond funded expeditions, other specimens were obtained through exchanges with various museums, institutions or scientists. These included the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, then directed by Louis Agassiz, the German museums of Kiel and Berlin, through Prof. Karl Moebius. Still other material was obtained through purchases from dealers or collectors, such as the Gal Brothers of Nice

and Deyrolle of Paris, to name a few. The remarkable specimens were then prepared for the public in the museum’s exhibition halls in the displays or in particular ones called “dioramas”, sometimes representing their behaviour, exceptionality or weirdness. Many specimens were obtained by Giglioli, thanks to his skills in contacting the directors of the most important museum of the world (his mother tongue was English), and proposing various exchanges and purchases of rare or recently discovered specimens. Among his acquisitions include the rare big Mediterranean fishes, the fragile Venus flower basket sponge (*Euplectella aspergillum*) which arrived to the Museum from an unusual catch in the Pacific Ocean, and the Tasmanian wolf, a gift of the Australian Museum, now an extinct species (Agnelli et al. 2009:182, 206).



Fig. 3 – The model of the giant salamander (*Andrias japonicus*) with a plate describing in Japanese its characteristics. Photo by Saulo Bambi.

The giant salamander (*Andrias japonicus*) model (Fig. 3) still exhibited in the Amphibian room has a particular story. A live specimen of the amphibian arrived at the Museum on 30th December 1875. It was donated to the Director of the

Museum by the Italian ambassador in Japan, and together with the salamander, included a plate that described its characteristics, which was written in Japanese. The large salamander was kept alive for more than 40 years in an aquarium, but in 1918 it was killed as it had become too aggressive toward the keeper who fed it. A plaster cast of the salamander was then prepared. Today the model, along with parts of the salamander's skeleton and the descriptive plate, are still on display at the museum.

At least till the year of Giglioli's death, the Museum was truly a place where everybody could travel without "travelling", where the zoological specimens recalled "exotism", by being unfamiliar or foreign to museum visitors.

After 1910, the golden age of La Specola ended with the rise of new scientific subjects, such as genetics and histology, and the shift in scientific interest towards the form and function of the organs, i.e. physiology, rather than morphology and systematics. At this point, the museum collections were no longer used in primary research.

Epilogue

At present, the Museum's mission is to protect biodiversity; large and indiscriminate collecting of specimens is avoided, and the displays focus on environmental issues and the protection of local fauna. The goal is to increase knowledge and recognition of conservation and biodiversity. The current tendency is not to have the museum seen as a temple, but rather as a forum; a place open to comparison, experiment and debate. A place where the visitor is asked to interact, not only to see, thus stimulating reflection instead of simply providing information.

The general intention is to keep the past heredity of the museum in good order, but not to praise the mere collection of trophies and stuffed specimens, even if the historical displays are by now part of the collective imagination of Florentines. Even today, in a unique and historical place such as La Specola, the fortunate fusion between natural history and art of taxidermy offers the visitor moments of recollection and suggests new reading keys of the essence of Nature, reinforced in the Museum halls.

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank Prof. Liv Emma Thorsen for her kind invitation to participate the seminar "Nature on display" and for the complete funding of my stay in Oslo. Thanks are due to my colleagues Fausto Barbagli and Marta Poggesi for drawing my attention to the anecdotes about some specimens of the Museum. A special thank to Dr Dean C. Adams (Iowa State University) for the English revision.

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