



Curiouser: New Encounters with the Victorian Natural History Collection . 2011

An exhibit curated by Erik Carlson + Erica Carpenter
at the Museum of Natural History, Roger Williams Park, Providence, RI • Fall 2010

The Museum is part of the [City of Providence](#) Parks and Recreation Department. Angel Taveras, Mayor.

OVERVIEW OF MUSEUM COLLECTIONS

The Museum's collections encompass a broad spectrum of biological, geological, and ethnographic materials. Amassed by hundreds of local collectors and amateur nature enthusiasts, specimens are overwhelmingly antiquarian, with most having been gathered between 1880 and 1930. Some portions of the cultural collections both pre-date and post-date this time period. Collections are worldwide in scope; they are not limited to Rhode Island and the surrounding area.

The collections are a unique window to the regional heyday of natural history collecting. They represent what people in our area were interested in during a time when natural history collecting (and collecting in general) was at peak popularity. Local residents from all walks of life indulged their passions for gathering objects from the natural world. Ethnographic materials were also amassed from indigenous cultures that, at the time, were believed to be vanishing. "Cultural curiosities" is what they were called.

The Museum's collections can be viewed as catalogues of artifacts that document the collecting era regionally. Their significance is magnified by virtue of having educational, scientific, historical, and aesthetic value. Approximately one quarter of a million (250,000) objects are held in the Museum's major collection areas that are as follows:

NATURAL SCIENCE COLLECTIONS

Geology: rocks and minerals; stalactites, sand vials, marble tiles

Paleontology: fossils; extinct plant and animal casts & impressions

Herbarium: pressed plants mounted on sheets, seaweed albums, seeds, seed pods

Marine Invertebrates: sponges, corals, crustaceans, starfish, other echinoderms

Mollusks: shells of marine, freshwater, land snails; bivalves, & cephalopods

Entomology: pinned insects; glass-covered Riker mounts of butterflies & moths

Ichthyology: preserved fish mounts, some skeletal material

Herptiles: preserved reptile mounts, turtle & tortoise shells, amphibian casts

Birds: nests & eggs, preserved study skins & posed mounts.

Mammals: preserved study skins & posed mounts; some skeletal material

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ETHNOGRAPHIC COLLECTIONS

Africa: wooden sculpture, metalwork, musical instruments, textiles, adornments

Oceania: wooden sculpture, weaponry, ceremonial paddles, barkcloth, adornments

Native North America: material culture including basketry, pottery, beadwork, textiles, adornments;
also extensive archaeological (lithic) collection of projectile points & other stone implements.

GUIDELINES + RESTRICTIONS FOR USE

The Museum wishes to put as few restrictions on use of collection objects as possible. We will follow the same basic guidelines used by curatorial staff in selecting exhibit material. One-of-a-kind specimens, particularly of rare, endangered, or extinct forms, are not chosen for exhibition. Minerals that are radioactive or those with other health and safety concerns would not be available for exhibition. Antiquarian pinned insects are extremely fragile; some of these determined to be stable, as well as more recently collected specimens, will be available for use with appropriate exhibit techniques.

When working with antiquarian collections it is readily apparent that some specimens are simply unsuitable for exhibit purposes. Some may be structurally unstable or damaged, brittle or fragile, or in generally poor condition. These would not be exhibit candidates.

Materials used in close association with specimens must be of archival quality. Museum staff will work with artists to locate desirable materials, many of which may already be available or easily obtained. No adhesives will be permitted to come into direct contact with specimens or their supporting bases. An exception to this will be "Mineral Tack," a kind of artificial clay, similar to poster clay. This may be applied in small amounts to most geological and fossil specimens when stabilization (i.e. prevention of shifting or rolling within the exhibit) is necessary.

Some fabrics and materials are not acceptable for use in enclosed exhibit cases. They are known to emit harmful vapors that degrade museum specimens. Included are carpet fragments, wool, jute, PVC (polyvinyl chloride), or PVA (polyvinyl acetate) used in some adhesives and paints. Composites such as masonite, fiberboard, chipboard, plywood, and other urea formaldehyde panels (e.g. Gator Foam) are also not acceptable. Museum staff will work with artists to find suitable substitutes for these materials.

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Museum of Natural History & Planetarium

Roger Williams Park
1000 Elmwood Avenue Providence, RI
Tel. 401.785.9457 ext. 221

COLLECTIONS + GUIDELINES

Use of oil-based paints, coatings, or sealants in enclosed exhibit cases is not acceptable. These are known to emit harmful compounds in enclosed exhibit cases. Only water-based polyurethane sealants, quality acrylic latex emulsions, and epoxy-resins may be used as applied surface coverings if needed. One week to ten days should be allowed for sealants to completely dry (cure) so any volatile fumes can off-gas prior to installing specimens. Adhesives used in enclosed cases must not contain formaldehydes or acids of any kind. Hot glue melts (polypropylene type,) Tyvek, Velcro, and acid-free glue sticks are all considered acceptable.

Artists must agree to wear gloves (either cotton or poly) at all times when handling museum specimens. These will be provided by the Museum. Many specimens may require special conservation or restoration treatment prior to exhibition; such treatment will be implemented by Museum staff.

OTHER MUSEUM INFO:

Website: <http://www.providenceri.com/museum/>

Hours: The Museum is open every day from 10 am until 5 pm.
Last admission to the Museum is at 4:30pm.
Museum admission is \$2 (\$1 for children under 2-7 years old.)
Some special programs have a separate admission.

Address: Museum of Natural History & Planetarium
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