APOLLO

THE INTERNATIONAL ART MAGAZINE

COMMENT

Natural history museums have never been more necessary

Nicole Heller

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View of the East Wing of the Museum für Naturkunde Berlin in 2013. Photo: Sean Gallup/Getty Images

Could the 21st century be a golden age for natural history museums? The recent announcement of €660m in funding from the German federal and state government to the Museum für Naturkunde Berlin suggests this may be the case. Funds were pledged to for the renovation of the 19th-century buildings and creation of a research and public engagement campus within the museum, focusing on ‘the themes of nature and society, life sciences and innovation’. The size of this investment demonstrates a recognition of the increasing relevance of natural history to science and society.

Natural history museums have the unique potential among cultural institutions to galvanise understanding and action on the environmental and social sustainability challenges of the 21st century. Arguably, this potential has been under-realised after decades of declining budgets and research and communication agendas focused too narrowly on the traditional uses of collections for describing and categorising biological diversity; many institutions are struggling to care properly for collections and keep curators and collection managers employed. Yet in light of the Anthropocene – the proposed geological epoch signalling the pervasive impact of human activities on the planetary system – there is a new urgency to reinterpret the relationships between nature and humans, and investigate collections in novel ways, to create understanding and pathways for improved sustainability and equity.

The tangible and intangible heritage of natural history collections are invaluable tools for making sense of these strange times. Politically, specimens and artefacts help bring into view the nature of contemporary sustainability and inequity crises, while also serving to situate contemporary change in deeper geologic time, and enable explorations of potential futures. Historically, owing to the links between enlightenment science, colonial expansion and violence, collections can also index loss on recent and deep time scales. Culturally, they also include beautiful and wondrous objects of inspiration and contemplation. A bald-eagle specimen on display in the Carnegie International in Pittsburgh this year has been one of the most memorable sights reported by visitors. This bird was shot down at the Battle of Gettysburg, 1863. Its body transports us to the very battlefield and to a moment when history was made. Scientifically, the value of biological collections continues to increase. Specimens are time capsules – they allow us to go back and see what conditions were like before. Bio surveys, a routine part of natural history research, can facilitate remarkable and disturbing discoveries, such as a 75 per cent decrease in the biomass of flying insects in German nature preserves over the last 27 years. With the aid of new analytic techniques, specimens are environmental proxies for climate and air quality. This use of biological collections could not have been foreseen, but now collections serve as essential data for understanding global change.

As the digitisation of collections becomes more rapid and efficient, and online accessibility grows, museums will function as a massive, distributed research facility allowing a much greater diversity of researchers to engage, and increasing the possibilities for innovation and creative use. We really do not know the true value of collections; their relevance will change and adapt along with society – both the questions asked, and the tools available. The challenge right now for natural history museums is to increase public access and participation with collections and research in ways that overcome some of the negative histories of colonisation, exclusion and elitism, and to situate scientific inquiry in a broader social and humanistic agenda of change. How can exhibition and curation promote respect for non-human beings while also displaying their dead bodies? How is research money for collections and science being fairly and equitably distributed across countries and communities? How can diverse publics be invited in to help craft a new story of nature and community – one that promotes deep individual and societal change?

Natural history museums have many agendas: scientific research, wildlife conservation, public education, equity and access, entertainment, advocacy. The generous and steady financial support provided to the Museum für Naturkunde Berlin over the next 10 years will no doubt help this historic museum to accomplish innovation on these multiple agendas: integrating the care of its 30 million-strong collection of specimens with advances in science and technology and community participation. I hope the money is spent in ways that distribute the benefits fairly and equitably, including improving connectivity and coordination among communities of the global North and South. It's certainly the right time to invest in natural history museums. As we face dire scientific reports, such as the recently published report 'Global Warming of 1.5 C' by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), these institutions and their subject matter have never been more relevant.

Nicole Heller is Museum Fellow and Curator of the Anthropocene at the Carnegie Museum of Natural History in Pittsburgh.

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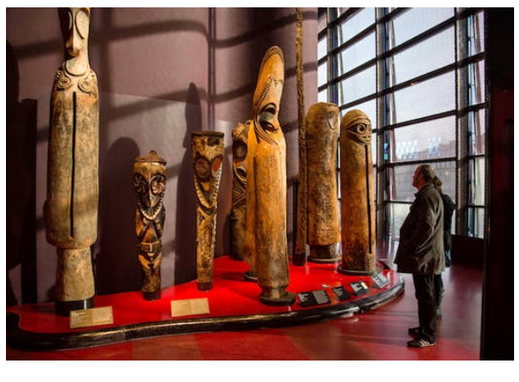

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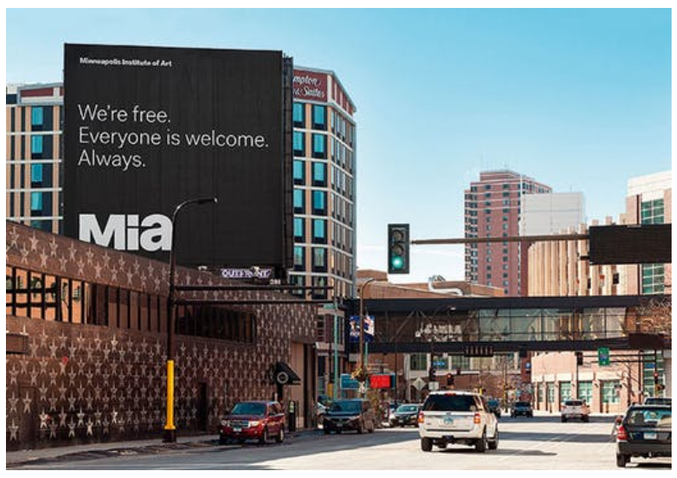

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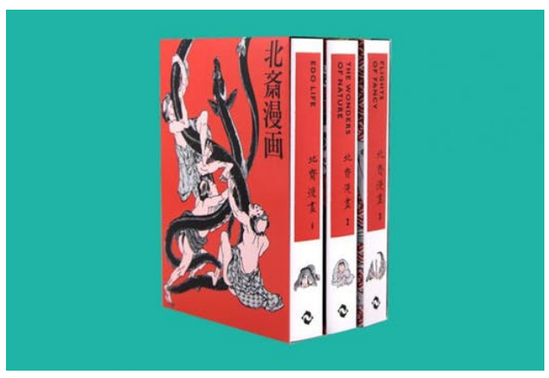

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