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Leander Wolstenholme, Curator of Botany, The Manchester Museum Displaying the Undisplayable

Not all collections lend themselves to public display. The reasons for this are numerous and include lack of gallery space, conservation considerations or simply that the specimens themselves are visually unappealing. Whilst some objects and specimens have been collected with display in mind e.g. paintings, sculptures, stuffed animals etc., many museum specimens were never intended for display. With gallery display ruled out, what are the most effective ways of engaging the public with undisplayable collections? This presentation explores some wierd, wonderful and rather odd ways of interpreting natural history collections.

Some collections seem to sell themselves with very little effort. For example mummies, dinosaurs and stuffed animals always seem to go down well with visitors. It's too easy for those sorts of objects. They just sit in a case and look great. Other collections, on the other hand, don't seem to have the same appeal. Take, for example, the botany collections at The Manchester Museum. I think it would be fair to say that most people would consider herbarium specimens to be visually on the wrong side of less than stunning. And that's the really good stuff. When it comes to packets of mosses and liverworts the word undisplayable, if it was a word in the first place, would find a very welcome home for its definition.

It's not only the visual appeal of the specimens that is a cause for concern but also conservation considerations. Due to the delicate nature of dried plant material the possibilities for display over a long period of time are limited. Having visited many museums, the most herbarium sheets I recall ever having seen on display were at Bolton Museum in 2003 when 25 specimens were on show, mounted in frames, for a period of a month.

The botanical collections at Manchester are very large, composed of approximately 1 million plants. Even if we'd managed to display the magnificent total of 25 specimens as Bolton did in 2003 it would comprise only 0.0025% of the collection. Taking this into consideration, if you then read something along the lines of:

‘putting the **visitor** at the centre of **everything** we do’

Emma Anderson, North West Hub Project Manager
Renaissance North West newsletter (2006).

This can be a matter of concern for a Curator of Botany when 99.9975% of the collection for which you are responsible has never been near a visitor and the chances of visitor contact in the future look very slim. Don't get me wrong, visitors are a very good thing. In fact the more visitors to museums the better and the broader the range of socio-economic groups the better. It's just that if the collection for which you are responsible was never intended as a visitor attraction in the first place it can be pretty testing thinking of ways to display it. However, once you've got over the initial shock and start to view things in a more positive light you can think of the whole thing as an opportunity to be as creative as possible. With botany collections, and other similar collections, you've really got to work it – the main thing is not the objects themselves but the stories they have to tell.

So, what are botanical displays generally made up of, if not actual herbarium specimens? Here is the botany top five, in reverse order:

5. Photographs. It might be best to think a display along the lines of Wildlife Photographer of the year or similar to envisage these displays. They are visually appealing displays, relatively easy to set up but generally don't involve any museum specimens at all – or if they do they are there as an adjunct rather than the main focus of the display.

4. Illustrations. This category includes books too. Similar in many ways to photographs, they make for nice visually appealing displays and the books and illustrations on show are often actually from botanical collections.

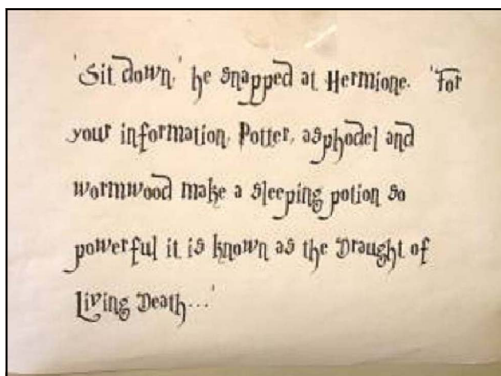
3. Big Seeds. Who can resist a massive pine cone or better still the legendary Coco de Mer. Is

there a museum anywhere in the world that doesn't have a *Coco de Mer* on display? No wonder it's on the IUCN Red List of Threatened plants.

2. Living Plants. Living plants are the easiest way of putting plants to the public – look at the popularity of parks and gardens and shows such as the Chelsea flower show. However, when your plants are flat, brown, dry and stuck a sheet of paper, somehow they seem to have less appeal.

1. Plant Models. It's a sorry museum that doesn't have a plant model on display.

Traditional gallery displays are probably never really going to work for herbarium specimens. So, how can botany collections be used to engage the public? Exploiting popular culture has worked really well both at the World Museum Liverpool and at The Manchester Museum. The film *Master and Commander* was launched in 2003 and the opportunity of jumping on the back of a film with 10 oscar nominations that featured a ship's naturalist as a key character was too good to miss. This was especially true as the World Museum Liverpool has collections from the Forsters who were the naturalists on Captain Cook's 2nd voyage, David Douglas and Archibald Menzies. The display of specimens in the Natural History Centre also featured a large poster with Russell Crowe glowering at the specimens below. Some found this a little hard to stomach but, at the end of the day, if the poster grabbed people's attention and drew them to the display, it can only have been a good thing.



The next exploitation of popular culture came when Harry Potter and the Half-Blood prince was published in July 2005. To celebrate the occasion we held a Young Wizard's Day at the Manchester Museum. It helps if your museum does actually look like Hogwarts and Manchester Museum certainly does with its grand staircases, gothic arches and meandering passages. J.K. Rowling is superb because real plants feature in the books and her facts are well researched. We were able to bring people on a tour of the botany collections. Positioned at stations en route were volunteers and members of staff bedecked in wizard costumes reading quotes about plants from the books and showing specimens of the plants named and discussing

their real-life medicinal and cultural uses. The tour finished with a potion-making class complete with bubbling mixtures of vinegar, bicarbonate of soda, food colouring and dry ice. The event proved to be extremely popular and we received very positive feedback.

Leading on from that when the film 'The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe' was released just before Christmas 2005, a Narnia day was held at the museum. Once again, this involved dressing up in Narnia costumes and, once again was extremely popular. However, on this occasion, the story line in Narnia wasn't quite so plant friendly but did allow a number of stuffed animals to be displayed. However, that turns out to be displaying the displayable rather than displaying the undisplayable. With any public programme event it's always hard to keep the focus on the actual plant specimens. Whether, its craft activities or drawing, the focus and emphasis of the event often relegates the actual specimens to a side-show.



As well as the events described above, we also tried many other ways to get the Manchester botany collections on display in 2005 including:

Meet the Curator – This was simply a curator sitting on the gallery documenting specimens. We thought that it might generate lots of questions and interest but it didn't really work. We also had objects for people to draw. This was much more popular.

National Potato Day – Everyone knows that National Potato Day is 29th January (don't they?). This event involved potato printing, a potato generated battery, potato facts, illustrations and specimens. Again, in this

instance, the specimens became sidelined

Step into Spring - A craft workshop making daffodils and spring flowers but also featuring specimens from the collection.

Sunny Sunflowers – A craft workshop making sunflowers from a variety of materials but also featuring specimens from the collection.

Handling Table – A regular session on the galleries where visitors can handle objects and ask volunteer demonstrators about the specimens. The handling table uses 3 botany items.

Life Through Time Exhibition – A temporary exhibition with one botany case featuring the largest (Coco de Mer!), smallest (orchid seeds), fastest growing (bamboo) etc.

Say it with Flowers – Valentines Day – An event focussed around the work of the former Professor of Botany at the University of Manchester, David Valentine involving music and poetry reading. This event was very focussed on David Valentine’s specimens.

The Bureau of the Centre for the Study of Surrealism and its Legacy: Exhibition – An installation by artist Mark Dion in the Temporary Exhibition Gallery. This uses 38 strange and bizarre botany items (including, of course, plant models!)

Herbarium Tours About 20 tours throughout the year

Talks to interested societies – taking specimens out and about giving talks.

The following table summarises all the specimens that were used from the botany collections in 2005 for various events. We feel that in terms of display and interpretation of specimens, 2005 was a very good year. Nonetheless, after all that, we still only managed to utilise 0.0398% of the collection.

Event/Display	No. of Specimens Displayed/Used
Master and Commander	6
Harry Potter Day	20
Freaky Fruits	15 x 2 sessions = 30
Sunny Sunflowers	5 x 2 sessions = 10
National Potato Day	15
Meet the Curator	20
Say it with Flowers	30
Handling Table	3
Life Through Time	6
Bureau of Surrealism	38
Herbarium Tours	10 per tour x 20 = 200
Talks to Societies	20
Total	398

If we continued to utilise the collections for display and interpretation at this rate, over 100 years we would have managed to display 3.98% of the collection, assuming that none of the specimens we re-used or re-displayed in more than one event or display.

In conclusion botany collections are generally very large and only a very small percentage can realistically ever be displayed. Trying to display and interpret the collections can be creative, fun and popular. But botany collections are clearly not about display. If you were only to retain specimens that could be displayed, you could reduce your botany collection to about 1000 items – probably less.

So what are botany collections for? One of the main donors of specimens to the Manchester herbarium was Charles Bailey (1838-1924). He gave over 350,000 specimens to the herbarium. The motivation for his

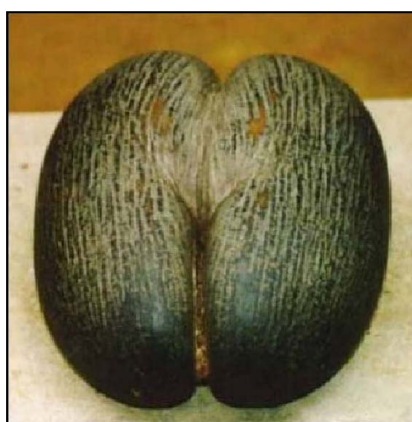
collection was that he

‘...endeavoured to obtain specimens of each species from as many different countries as possible, so that the changes a species undergoes as a result of climatic influences could be clearly recognised. This meant, of course, that each species was represented by many sheets in the herbarium’ (Weiss, 1930)

This statement about environmental change seems ever more poignant today. Botany collections are about many things but most of all they are about data. The challenge is to use that data for maximum public benefit. Going back to the quote earlier on from Emma Anderson, it seems a mistake, certainly in terms of botany collections, to put the ‘visitor’ at the centre of everything. It is much more effective to put the ‘user’ at the centre of everything.

Reference:

Weiss F.E. 1930. Three Manchester Botanists. *Notes from the Manchester Museum*. No. 33



Henry McGhie, Head of Natural Sciences, The Manchester Museum, The University of Manchester
Representing nature in museums: the roles of attitude and authority

The Manchester Museum is in the process of recontextualising its Natural History galleries with a view to redevelopment. ‘Natural history’ has been considered to be in decline for over 100 years and the role of museum natural history stands in question. In this talk, some of the preconceptions and changing attitudes to ‘nature’ and ‘natural history’ will be touched upon. The changing role of museum galleries, from presenting a particular world view to one which advocates global citizenship and earth stewardship, will be explored. As a specific example, the representation of gender in a natural history gallery will be explored.

In this article, I will explore some of the issues which our redevelopment faces, in terms of what we might want to say and what the public might want to hear. Unfortunately, I do not plan on coming up with solutions here, but to recognise some of the issues and tensions which exist.

So what is natural history; what is a natural historian? Do we think of Gilbert White, communing with nature in order to make sense of his own place in the world? Or do we think of imperialists such as Joseph Banks, using knowledge of the natural world to drive political movements? The answer is that natural history covers both aspects, White’s ‘Arcadian ecology’ and Banks’s imperialist technoscience, are merely two different facets of the same movement. It is interesting to note that the three stated aims of the forthcoming Linnaean tercentenary, namely creativity, curiosity and science, encapsulate both of these strands.

Natural history has been considered to have become a ‘deeply unsexy’ subject (eg. Secord 1996). Fewer and fewer universities offer courses in natural history and many museums have rebranded themselves as natural science institutions. In its original meaning, natural history meant the description and enumeration of things, not necessarily restricted to plants, animals, minerals or phenomena. A ‘natural history’ was re-