



EVERYTHING OR NOTHING?

WHAT DO UNIVERSITY MUSEUMS KNOW?

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BARD GRADUATE CENTER, NEW YORK CITY

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The Nineteenth Horst Gerson Lecture
held in memory of Horst Gerson (1907-1978)
in the aula of the University of Groningen
on the 6th of October 2017

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I cannot claim any vivid memory of Horst Gerson. However, I am confident that I met him at the Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie when I was a child. My father took me there, and I remember meeting a number of formal, well-dressed men, one of whom was the director. I also remember being struck by the strangeness of the rooms filled from floor to ceiling with shelves of solander boxes. The RKD was still in that same beautiful building on the Korte Vijverberg when I began my graduate studies, though Professor Gerson was not.

As a young scholar, I was impatient with much of the work of my predecessors. It was not until I came to catalog the Dutch and Flemish paintings in the Thyssen Collection in 1985 that I began to develop a respect for such earlier work.³ I found myself trying to assess my predecessors' scholarship without applying the benefits of hindsight. In this way I developed a great respect for many of the art historians of Horst Gerson's generation, including Professor Gerson himself.

Professor Gerson had faced many puzzles of Rembrandt attribution, whereas I was fortunate in having to cope with only one, an ostensible self-portrait. Through doing so, I gained a practical insight into some of the challenges involved. Professor Gerson was an empirical scholar, whereas my tendencies head in the direction of the second order question. Therefore I think of the matter of Rembrandt attribution not in terms of a finite solution to an empirical question—which works did Rembrandt himself create?—but as an epistemological riddle to which the answer may satisfy philosophers but appall art historians: Each generation gets the Rembrandt oeuvre it creates for itself. Connoisseurship conforms to a set of conventions. Defining those conventions interests me more than applying them.

I have just presented you with two models of scholarship: one empirical, the other philosophical. My topic today concerns the place of both kinds of scholarship in museums, specifically in museums that are constituents of universities. I contend that every university that has museums of whatever kind

should be asking searching questions about their proper role. So, at the outset, and not without a streak of characteristic facetiousness, I ask a question derived from Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*: "Everything or Nothing? What do university museums know?"⁴

In exploring this question, I shall refer to a great variety of material, from etchings to insects, from paintings to jellyfish. I shall sketch the origins of university museums as encyclopedic in the eighteenth century, and their division into disciplinary collections in the nineteenth. I shall show how things were acquired, either on purpose or by chance, as university museums along with academies, government bodies, dealers, and private individuals, scoured the world for things that could be described, identified, categorized, stored, and displayed in order to know that world. I shall then argue that this way of making knowledge claims was displaced by the rise of experiment and abstraction in the twentieth century so that museums lost their relevance. Yet, I shall argue, new transdisciplinary scholarship can reactivate those museums, especially in universities, if they reach across disciplinary boundaries.

Museums have never been more in the public eye than at present. The social prestige attached to art ensures that art museums receive particular attention, but developments occur in other kinds of museums, too. What is the role of museums within universities? Can museums that are parts of universities contribute to the generation of scholarship, or are they merely subsidiary, serving, at best, as teaching tools? Fostering public relations, offering public instruction and recreation is part of the duty of most museums, but it is not their only function, any more than teaching undergraduates is the only function of universities.

Many university museums provide a channel for mutual engagement between the public and the university. This strikes me as admirable. But it is also incidental to their purpose. The fundamental purpose of all university museums is the same as that of any other academic unit of a university: that is, the generation of knowledge claims based on research, scholarship, and teaching. Some university administrators imply that the generation of knowledge occurs not in university museums, but elsewhere in the university,



1. Sidney L. Smith after an engraving of 1767 by Paul Revere, after Joseph Chadwick, *A Westerly View of the Colledges in Cambridge, New England*, 1916, engraving, The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs: Print Collection, The New York Public Library (Stokes 1768-B-68)

and that university museums are no more than conduits for transmitting that knowledge. When publicizing such work takes precedence over doing that work itself, university museums soon become incapable of generating knowledge claims themselves. If university museums are to be sites of scholarship, what kind of scholarship can they conduct? Can it contribute to theoretical discussion, or must it be confined to empirical matters, such as forever refining taxonomies, whether of artworks or algae?

Museums have a responsibility to produce not only new knowledge claims, but paradigm shifting ideas. This used to be taken for granted. Universities have had purpose built museums at least since Oxford opened the Ashmolean



2. Ernst Ludwig Riepenhausen, *The Academic Museum, Göttingen*, 1833, from *Erinnerungen an Göttingen im Sommer 1833* (Göttingen, n.d.), engraving, State and University Library, Göttingen

Museum in 1683. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Enlightenment values led to the formation of collections of varied materials at European and American colleges and universities. These were—broadly speaking—encyclopedic museums. An example is the Philosophy Chamber, founded at Harvard in 1766.⁵ Encompassing portraits, scientific instruments, and natural and artificial curiosities, the Philosophy Chamber occupied rooms on the second floor of the building with the cupola in Paul Revere's print (Fig. 1). A second example is the Academic Museum of the University of Göttingen, which opened in 1773 in the building perpendicular to the former St. Paul's Church. Once again, this was a wide-ranging collection that included things



3. Joseph Swan after John Fleming, *The Hunterian Museum*, 1829, engraving, Mitchell Library, Glasgow (GC 914.14353 SWA)

both natural and human-made (Fig. 2).⁶ The obstetrician and collector of scientific specimens, antiquities, and art, William Hunter, bequeathed his very varied collections to the University of Glasgow in 1783. A purpose built museum housing them, designed by William Stark in the form of a classical temple, opened in 1807 (Fig. 3).

Then things changed. During the nineteenth century, universities divided their collections, once treated as comprehensive wholes, according to emergent academic disciplines. These narrow collections—of natural history, or of art, for instance—were dispersed within their universities. In addition, universities formed new, focused collections along the same limited lines.

At Oxford, for instance, a new building for the Ashmolean Museum opened in 1845. It developed into an institution devoted to art and archaeology alone. The natural history collections of the Ashmolean found a new home in the Museum of Natural History, founded in 1860. In 1884, Augustus Pitt Rivers donated his collections to the university to become the basis of an ethnographic museum. The Museum of the History of Science, housed in the original building of the Ashmolean Museum, finally took shape in 1924.

Similar stories of the division of the eighteenth-century general collections into bodies of things associated with emerging disciplines, and the foundation of new museums specific to any one of them, could be told of numerous universities. For instance, at Harvard, by 1820, the collections of various kinds accommodated in the Philosophy Chamber and its neighboring rooms since 1766 had been crowded out and distributed among disciplinary collections to which others, such as Louis Agassiz's Museum of Comparative Zoology, which opened in 1859, and the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, which opened in 1866, were added.

This division and disciplinary focus encouraged the proliferation of new knowledge claims based on observation, description, and categorization. This was a good use of collections within universities—at the time—for specialized collections were often vital to the creation of knowledge claims within an entire A to Z of disciplines, from anthropology to zoology. In zoology, for instance, researchers at the Museum of Comparative Zoology laid the basis for the current collection of over seven million specimens, over 33,000 of which are primary type specimens; that is, specimens of reference that establish the characteristics of a species. And please note that in citing these figures—over seven million specimens, and over 33,000 primary type specimens—I am referring solely to the Museum of Comparative Zoology's holdings of insects. The Entomology Department is just one of ten research departments that among them hold over 21 million specimens.⁷

Within entomology, let us consider Coleoptera—beetles. The collections of beetles formed by nineteenth-century entomologists John LeConte and George Henry Horn, and by H.C. Fall in the early twentieth century, make the

MCZ the single most important North American collection of beetles owing to its extensive type holdings. None of these scholars worked at the MCZ—indeed they were private collectors—but the museum knew to acquire their collections in order to consolidate its position at the forefront of taxonomic research in beetle studies.

Why study beetles, you may ask? Identification and control of beetles can be a matter of economic success or disaster, as is shown by the frightful effect of the Colorado beetle (*Leptinotarsa decemlineata*), native to North America, which spread eastwards across the continent from about 1859 onwards destroying potato crops, and reaching western Europe by 1877. Understanding beetles matters.

Those of you who prefer paintings to potatoes will realize that the larvae of various kinds of beetle are a threat to items made from wood, including seventeenth-century Dutch and Flemish panel paintings and their frames. I choose an example from among the panel paintings that King Christian IV of Denmark ordered from Antwerp to form a decorative ensemble for the Winter Room at Rosenborg Castle, Copenhagen. Horst Gerson drew attention to these works in his study of seventeenth and eighteenth-century Dutch artists who traveled to Denmark.⁸ The 95 paintings, ordered in bulk, as Gerson established, were set into elaborate paneling, each in a triple frame. Conservator Jørgen Wadum has established that in each instance the inner two were mounted in Antwerp, and the outer one in Copenhagen.⁹ Wadum points out that Antwerp guild regulations permitted the use of beech rather than oak for one frame when two are paired, and beech was used for the innermost frames in the Winter Room.¹⁰ Beech is more susceptible to insect infestation than oak, and, although he does not comment on their presence, Wadum illustrates the back of a set of frames in which holes are plainly visible. Various larvae thrive on certain kinds of wood. These include the common furniture beetle (*Anobium punctatum*), the death watch beetle (*Xestobium rufovillosum*), the powderpost beetle (*Lyctus* spp), and the house longhorn beetle (*Hylotrupes bajulus*). Panel paintings and frames are vulnerable.

The Museum of Comparative Zoology is well placed to research not only beetles, but a plethora of other zoological organisms. Yet in the nineteenth century and beyond, the project of systematizing the world through scholarship in museums was far from confined to zoology. It concerned just about any material thing that humans could gather, move, sort, and store. Museums provided the sorting tools at every point on the scale. The large scale concerned the emergent disciplines themselves, whether anthropology and archaeology, art, history, science, technology, or medicine. At the fine end of the scale were distinctions within kinds of things, such as among species of beetles, or states of Rembrandt's etchings. The epistemological assumptions and—broadly speaking—procedures are identical in all these and thousands of other cases, consisting of systematization based on fine distinctions of appearance. This is what museums were—and remain—good at. This was a vital element of scholarly inquiry throughout the nineteenth and for much of the twentieth centuries. Museums, redefined by the mid-nineteenth century as specialist groups of scholars attending to specialist collections, were highly effective as institutions for generating such knowledge claims about the observable world.

We think of museums as institutions where selected parts of the world are gathered, sorted, described, stored, and displayed; yet people had to gather those things in the first place. Most museum collections, though, are often unpredictable mixtures of things deliberately acquired, and chance donations. As Ethan Lasser and Lola Sánchez-Jáuregui have shown, the collection of the Philosophy Chamber at Harvard, housed in Harvard Hall newly rebuilt in 1766, included some things bought purposefully.¹¹ These included scientific instruments, such as the globe electric machine, ordered from London in 1766; and the portrait by John Singleton Copley of Nicholas Boylston, who had endowed the professorship of rhetoric and oratory in 1771. But many other things entered solely on the initiative of a donor. For instance, James Bowdoin III, class of 1771, gave a group of European marble samples to the college in 1796. John Singleton Copley, who had received several portrait commissions from the college, gave a number of mezzotints after his paintings, including his celebrated work of 1778 that had secured his reputation in London, *Watson and the Shark*.

The foundational use of all these things, whether purposefully or serendipitously acquired, was for observation: observation of the generation of electricity; of the character of a benefactor inferred from his physical appearance; of the properties of various forms of a single mineral; of heroic human actions represented in print. And observation proliferated as people of European origin spread across the globe, observing the world with ever more precise instruments for surveying, magnifying, and measuring.

Among the most ambitious attempts at measurement in the eighteenth century were those based on coordinated, minutely accurate observations made at sites worldwide to calculate the distance of the planets, including the Earth, from the Sun and from one another. Venus moves across the face of the Sun as seen from the Earth approximately every 113 years, with two transits separated by eight years. Observations of the transit from different parts of the world could be used to calculate the distance of the Earth from the Sun by triangulation.¹² For the 1761 transit, observers were sent from Britain, France and Austria to Siberia, Madagascar, Norway, Cape of Good Hope, and Newfoundland; and in 1769, the Royal Society of London sent observers to recently discovered Tahiti, and Northern Norway, while others went to Hudson Bay, Baja California, and St. Petersburg.

One expedition in 1761 was from Massachusetts to Newfoundland, led by Harvard's Hollis Professor of Mathematics and Natural Philosophy, John Winthrop.¹³ Winthrop had to take the most accurate instruments possible with him. These included Winthrop's own reflecting telescope made by James Short in London in about 1758 (Fig. 4). He used the same telescope eight years later for the 1769 transit of Venus.¹⁴ When John Singleton Copley painted Winthrop's portrait in about 1773, he included the telescope Winthrop had used to observe the transits of Venus as a kind of attribute (Fig. 5). The college acquired the telescope following Winthrop's death in 1779, and it remains a reminder of the kind of expedition undertaken by learned societies, universities, and their museums from that time onwards.

John Winthrop's things that entered Harvard's collection, and that the college acquired for his and his successors' use, are means by which they made



4. James Short, 1-foot Cassegrain reflecting telescope, c. 1758,
Harvard University Collection of Historical Scientific Instruments (0053)



5. John Singleton Copley, *John Winthrop (1714-1779)*, c. 1773, oil on canvas,
Harvard University Portrait Collection, Gift to Harvard College by the executors of the estate
of John Winthrop and heirs of Mrs. Andrews, 1894 (H113)



6. John Raphael Smith after Benjamin West, *Joseph Banks*, 1773, mezzotint, British Museum, London (1841,0809.150)

observations rather than things themselves that they observed. Yet observable things were entering university collections at the same time, acquired in the course of far-flung expeditions. Although one of James Cook's responsibilities during his first voyage to the Pacific was to observe the transit of Venus in 1769 from Tahiti, the expedition also gathered natural history specimens and artifacts.¹⁵ Joseph Banks, who was to become the long-serving president of the Royal Society, acquired many culturally highly valued things, including a *kaitaka*, a Māori linen cloak fringed with dog hair from Aotearoa New Zealand. Each *kaitaka* embodies chiefly status and prestige in a particular lineage, but is also a mantle of power, enveloping its wearer in the protection of the creator deity within its fabric. On his return to England in 1771, Banks commissioned a portrait from Benjamin West—published as a mezzotint in 1773—in which he is shown wearing the *kaitaka* (Fig. 6).¹⁶ Banks gave the *kaitaka* and various other highly charged Māori items, including four *patu* (hand clubs), to his Oxford college, Christ Church.¹⁷ They thereby entered a university collection. They were later consigned to the Pitt Rivers Museum, founded as an ethnographic museum in 1884.¹⁸

When Joseph Banks withdrew from serving as naturalist on James Cook's second Pacific voyage in 1772, the father and son team of Johann Reinhold and Georg Forster took his place.¹⁹ Between 1772 and 1775 they made extensive collections of natural history specimens and artifacts. Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, whose scholarship brought together medicine, natural history, physiology, and ethnology, was the professor at the University of Göttingen responsible for the Academic Museum. He lobbied the privy council of Hanover for material from Cook's three voyages. King George III of Great Britain, who was also elector of Hanover, offered a collection of natural and artificial curiosities assembled for the purpose from various London dealers, notably George Humphrey, who supplied this basketry and featherwork Hawai'ian deity, Kūka'ilimoku (Fig. 7). The collection was sent to Göttingen in 1782. The last item to arrive was the spectacular mourner's regalia from Tahiti, which Georg Forster recorded in his diary as the highlight of the Academic Museum (Fig. 8). From 1778 onwards, Georg Forster made a number of donations, but only on



7. Unidentified maker(s), Deity (*ki'i hulu manu*): *Kuka'ilimoku*, before 1780, Hawai'i, wicker, feathers, mother-of-pearl, dog teeth, Ethnologisches Sammlung, Georg-August University, Göttingen (Inv. Oz 254)



8. Unidentified maker(s), Mourning Dress *heva*, before 1780, Tahiti, shell, barkcloth, tortoiseshell, feathers, mother-of-pearl, Ethnologisches Sammlung, Georg-August University, Göttingen (Inv. Oz 1522)

the death in 1798 of his father, Johann Reinhold, whom Georg had predeceased in 1794, did the university acquire a large body of the Forsters' Oceanic material. By these means, the University of Göttingen gathered the largest number of items in any one place to have been collected during James Cook's three voyages to the Pacific.²⁰ The Cook-Forster Collection at the University of Göttingen is an amalgam of items gathered by various participants in Cook's voyages, the Forsters most prominent among them. Some of them had passed through the hands of dealers, and so were not the fruits of a dedicated university expedition, but before the end of the eighteenth century, these materials had been assembled in the university museum for academic use, including the definition of what would become the new discipline of ethnology.

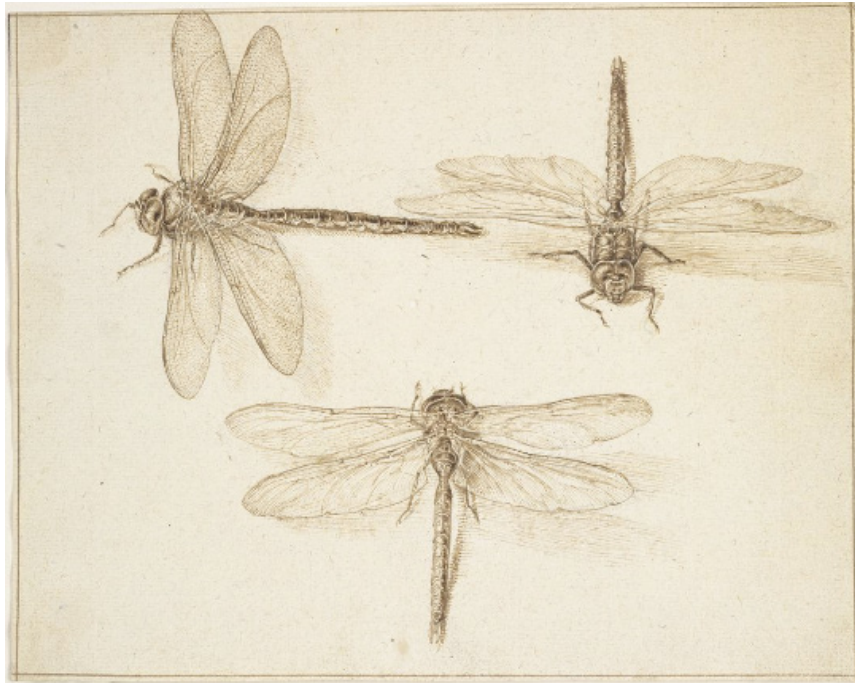
What we see in all these examples of expeditions devoted to observation, collection, and categorization, is university museums and collections piggy-backing on the endeavors sponsored or conducted under royal or government patronage, by academies or learned societies, and by private individuals. Private collectors could finance their own projects by arranging to "supply duplicates to museums and amateurs," as Alfred Russel Wallace put it in the preface to *The Malay Archipelago*, published in 1869, his account of his eight years spent collecting natural history specimens—over 126,000 of them—in what is now Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia.²¹ For example, the Cambridge University Museum of Zoology acquired bird skeletons, skulls, and skins that Wallace had collected in the Malay archipelago.²² Among them was a skin of the spectacular rhinoceros hornbill. The number of beetles Wallace collected far exceeded the birds: reportedly over 80,000 specimens. Wallace profited from the specimens he sent back to Britain, where his agent sold those he did not wish to retain. This allowed him to remain in the field between 1854 and 1862. Such a lengthy expedition would not have been feasible for members of a university or a museum, yet at this time universities were mounting expeditions of their own. But before turning to an example of a celebrated university museum expedition, I want to draw your attention to expeditions undertaken with predominantly commercial ends—those of British art dealers to continental Europe to acquire artworks displaced during the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars.

Various dealers scoured the continent, but it was the London dealer John Smith who realized that methodical observation and categorization of more than his own stock was necessary if reliable information about Old Master paintings was to be established and made available. This meant firsthand examination. The result was his nine volume work, *A Catalogue Raisonné of the Works of the Most Eminent Dutch, Flemish, and French Painters* (1829-42).²³ Smith's work of observation and categorization is part of a pattern of empirical research that far transcends the history of art. It has a particular significance on this occasion because Smith's was the monumental work on which Cornelis Hofstede de Groot based his own *Catalogue Raisonné* in the early twentieth century.²⁴ This was the very foundation of the Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie, and so Smith's work is the direct ancestor of that of Horst Gerson.

Smith's observation, description, and categorization of Dutch and Flemish seventeenth-century paintings occupies the same epistemological space as contemporaneous works of natural history, such as the monumental *Recherches sur les poissons fossiles* published between 1833 and 1843 by the Swiss scholar, Louis Agassiz.²⁵ The growth of disciplinary specialization, notably at universities and their museums in the nineteenth century, means that now most art historians are only interested in art, and ichthyologists are only interested in fish. This has obscured what their endeavors have in common.

Instead, art historians have subordinated items made as explorations of the natural world to the dictates of art. Art dealers and collectors in search of fresh material, followed by art historians, have adopted and absorbed what had previously, and perhaps anachronistically, been deemed "scientific" illustrations from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. For example, a sheet of three studies of a dragonfly by the early seventeenth-century draughtsman and painter, Jacques de Gheyn II, is currently on loan from a Boston collector to the Harvard Art Museums (Fig. 9).²⁶

If art collectors and art historians have adopted seventeenth and early eighteenth-century visual material produced in pursuit of natural history knowledge, the same cannot be said invariably of later scientific illustrations,



9. Jacques de Gheyn, II, *Three Studies of a Dragonfly*, 1600, brown ink over black chalk on cream antique laid paper, Maida and George Abrams Collection, Boston, Massachusetts, on loan to the Harvard University Art Museums, Cambridge, Massachusetts (TL41760.3)

which are often of extremely high quality. Letterpress and intaglio prints required different printing processes, so engraved illustrations were considerably more expensive to produce than were woodcut illustrations that could be combined with text for printing on the same press. Some art publications in the middle of the nineteenth century incorporated high quality translation engravings, for instance the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, which began



10. Charles Blanc, *Rembrandt* (after Rembrandt van Rijn), 1859, drypoint, from *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 1, 1859, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 1917 (17.3.1950)

publication in 1859 under the editorship of Charles Blanc. The April issue included a foretaste of Blanc's forthcoming catalog raisonné of the works of Rembrandt. It included a separately printed drypoint by Blanc himself after a Rembrandt self-portrait (fig. 10).²⁷ But the incorporation of fine woodcuts was the standard means of reproducing art. Thus, in her pioneering and influential two volume study published in 1848, *Sacred and Legendary Art*, Anna Jameson

ST. RAPHAEL.

Of this last subject, the picture in the Louvre may be pronounced one of his finest;—miraculous for true and spirited expression, and for the action of the soaring angel, who parts the clouds and strikes through the air like a strong swimmer through the waves of the sea.

The story of Tobit, as a series of subjects, has been very frequently represented, always in the *genre* and picturesque style of the later schools. I shall have to return to it hereafter; here I have merely alluded to the devotional treatment, in order to direct attention to the proper character of the Archangel Raphael.



41 Archangel. Rembrandt.

And thus we have shown

— how Holy Church
Doth represent with human countenance
Gabriel and Michäel, and him who made
Tobias whole. DANTE, *Par.* c. iv.

11. After Rembrandt, *Archangel Raphael*, woodcut from Mrs. Jameson, *Sacred and Legendary Art* (London, 1848), I, p. 97 fig. 41



Fig. 12 After Gerrit Dou, *The Dropsical Woman*, 1663, in John Smith, *A Catalogue Raisonné...*, vol. I, 1829, opp. p. 32

uses a woodcut to illustrate the Archangel Raphael, a reversed detail of Rembrandt's celebrated painting in the Louvre (Fig. 11).²⁸

Returning to a comparison I mentioned earlier of John Smith's *Catalogue Raisonné* (1829-42) and Louis Agassiz's *Poissons fossiles* (1833-43), it seems ironic that Smith's volumes devoted to the categorization and description of paintings should be illustrated with just a few plates. Gerrit Dou's *Dropsical Woman* in the Louvre is the first, opposite p. 32 in Vol. 1 (Fig. 12); one of only six plates in that volume. By contrast, the illustrations in Agassiz's *Poissons fossiles* are of an entirely different quality and quantity. These plates stun the viewer even now (Fig. 13). The plates in Agassiz's subsequent publications are even more spectacular. Take his massive five-volume work, *Contributions to the Natural History of the United States* (1857-77). Agassiz was appointed to head the new Lawrence Scientific School at Harvard in 1848. His assistants prepared newly acquired specimens, and drew them for lithographic reproduction under Agassiz's own supervision. Jacques Burkhardt was his

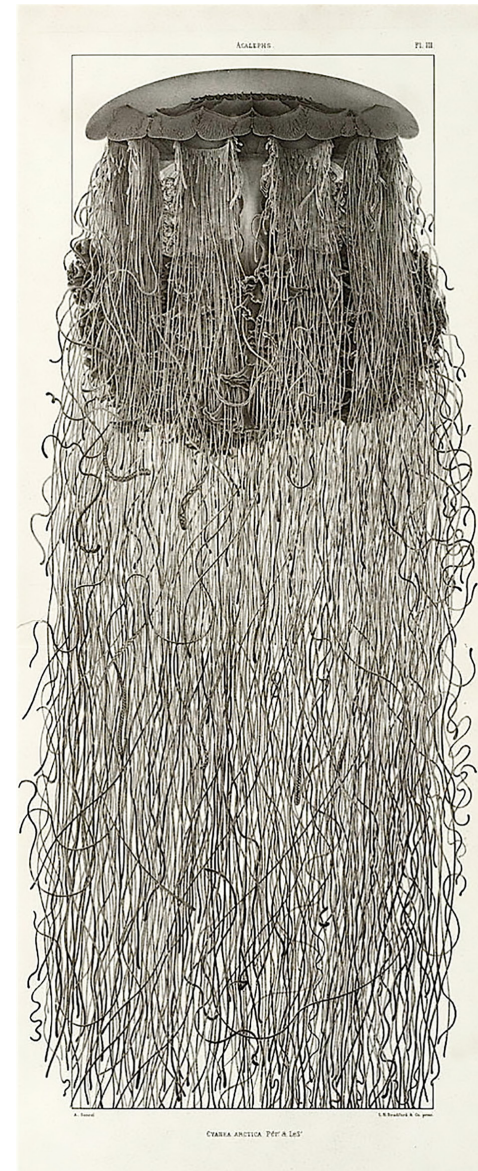


13. Hercule Nicolet, *Ctenoid fish fossil* (*Cyclopoma gigas* Agass), lithograph, from Louis Agassiz, *Recherches sur les poissons fossiles*, 1833-43, Vol. 4, Atlas, Tab. 2

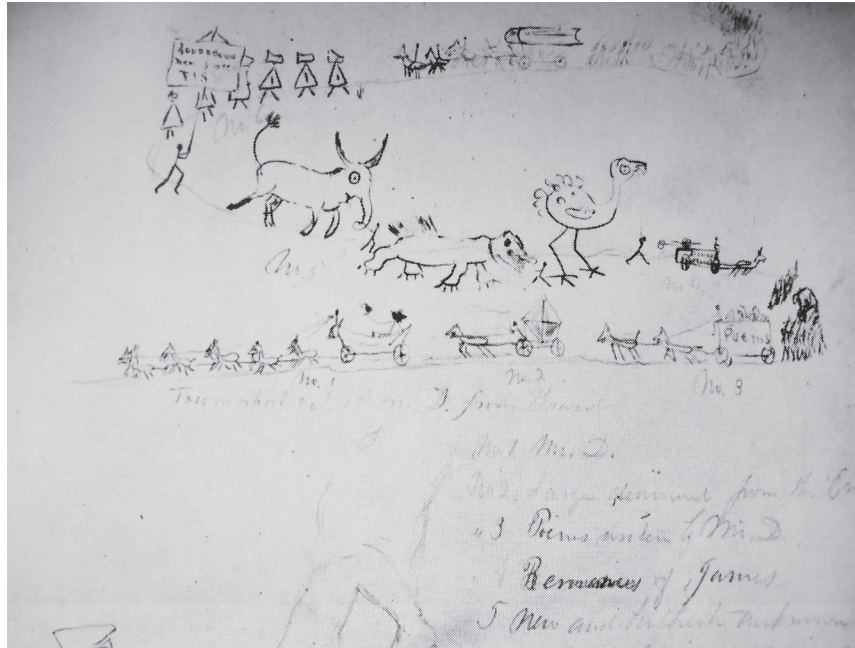
principal artist. His lithograph of a lion's mane jellyfish (*Cyanea capillata*, given by Agassiz as *Cyanea arctica*) astonishes those who come across it as a triple foldout plate in Vol. 3, published in 1860 (Fig. 14). It is surely one of the most arresting prints of the nineteenth century, but has yet to be treated as art.

In 1859, Agassiz opened a new museum at Harvard dedicated to his theories of observation and categorization, which he named the Museum of Comparative Zoology.²⁹ This was a collection for both research and the inculcation in his students of the careful and precise recording of observations of specimens. 1859 was the year of publication of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*. Agassiz spent the remainder of his life attempting to refute Darwin's theories of instability of species, natural selection, responsiveness to local environment, and evolution.

In 1865, with the financial support of the banker Nathaniel Thayer, Louis Agassiz undertook his first foreign expedition with the aim of refuting Darwin's theories. It was the first to place a university museum in the forefront of the kind of expedition-based research that had hitherto been the province



14. Auguste Sonrel after Jacques Burkhart, *Cyanea arctica*, from Louis Agassiz, *Contributions to the Natural History of North America*, Vol. 3, 1860, Plate III



15. William James, *Caricature of the Return of the Thayer Expedition from Brazil*, 1866, ink on paper, Houghton Library, Harvard University (MS Am1092.2)

of royal or government patronage, academies, learned societies, and private individuals. Agassiz's destination was Brazil. His party included his wife, Elizabeth Cary Agassiz, four fellow scientists, six of his students, and the artist, Jacques Burkhardt. Many of Burkhardt's Brazilian watercolors were adapted as illustrations to *A Journey in Brazil*, Louis and Elizabeth Agassiz's account of the expedition, published in 1868.³⁰ Burkhardt made sketches of specimens, notably fish, collected in both the Rio de Janeiro area, and in the Amazon. Fish were one of Agassiz's principal obsessions, and he returned with innumerable specimens, identifying near-identical instances from different locations as



16. Augusto Stahl, *Brazilian Man*, 1865, photograph, Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University (2004.24.34272)

separate species. The future psychologist and philosopher William James, then at the Harvard Medical School, was one of the students on the expedition. He satirized Agassiz's proliferation of species in a caricature depicting its return as a procession. A stick figure holds a placard announcing "4,0000000000 new species of fish" (Fig. 15).³¹

Agassiz, though, did not confine his observations and categorization to fish, let alone the zoological sphere. He observed and categorized human beings in a complex society known for ethnic intermixture. Agassiz's work had earlier been used by apologists for slavery in the USA owing to his adherence to a



17. Unknown photographer, *Bust after the Apollo Belvedere*: Apollo von Belvedere, carte-de-visite, mid-19th-century, Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University

theory of polygenesis, or the separate origin of human races. In Brazil, where slavery remained until 1888, he was eager to document not only instances of what he thought of as racial purity, whether white, black, or indigenous, but also what he termed “the evil of this mixture of races.” For this purpose, he employed photographers in Rio de Janeiro and Manaus on the Amazon. He had some of these photographs translated into woodcuts to illustrate his and his wife’s published account. Others were suppressed until their publication in 2010 (Fig. 16).³² Some are hard to look at, for we now resist regarding human beings as specimens. You may be thinking that considerations such as these have taken us a long way from art and art history, but that is not the case. Among Agassiz’s carefully categorized photographs allegedly exemplifying racial purity, is an image of the bust of the *Apollo Belvedere* (Fig. 17). Many in 1866 still regarded it as the cynosure of male perfection. An unreflecting prejudice that elevates images of white people in the manner of classical antiquity to unquestioned supremacy, and that denigrates the physical qualities of other peoples, is a grave though avoidable danger in the study of art as well as anthropology. That said, it is well established that a taste for the warts and wrinkles as shown by Rembrandt never conformed with the most classicizing taste, so perhaps we can see those who favor his art as in some cases, at least, being prepared to take people as they find them, potentially seeing something of value in anyone, regardless of status or ethnicity.

The work of a university museum expedition does not end with its return. Processing the materials brought back is an enormous task. In the case of the Thayer Expedition, considerable quantities of specimens had not been processed by the time of Louis Agassiz’s death in 1873.

In the light of these examples of expeditions and the accrual of things to their collections, we might now ask “What do university museums know?” The answer might be that those responsible for university museums have come to realize that they have become increasingly marginalized within their universities because the way in which scholars make knowledge claims has increasingly left behind dependence on collection, observation, and categorization. This has meant that the earlier usefulness of university museums has scarcely

survived into the twenty-first century. In the course of the twentieth century, observation increasingly gave way to experimentation, and empirical evidence to immaterial factors. In consequence, university collections came to seem increasingly irrelevant to scholarly enquiry. This was because the dominant epistemological paradigm in Western thinking shifted from empirical observation and categorization practiced by museums, to experimentation and abstraction prized by universities. This is the historian Steven Conn's contention, and I agree with him.³³

In the minds of university administrators, collections of many kinds have been reduced from valuable assets to embarrassing encumbrances fit, at best, for occasional use in undergraduate instruction and public entertainment. In recent decades, museums at many universities, constrained by collections defined in accordance with academic disciplines that have subsequently come to focus on immaterial matters, have scarcely contributed to the generation of fundamental knowledge claims. This is not to ignore that many have continued to produce modest incremental scholarship in areas such as taxonomy and technical analysis. Yet division and disciplinary focus that have enabled such work have also inhibited recognition of connections among bodies of varied material.

At present, though, we are experiencing a further paradigm shift in the generation of knowledge claims. Scholars in various fields are once again pursuing empirical examination, not in any backward-looking sense, but in ways informed by theoretical considerations derived from an engagement with abstract ideas. Furthermore, much of this empirical and theoretical work is far from confined to single disciplines, including the disciplines that formed museums. Much of this empirical and theoretical work is transdisciplinary. This means that in order to participate in emerging modes of knowledge production, museums associated with particular disciplines have to collaborate across disciplinary boundaries. As yet, though, many museums of different kinds within universities scarcely have anything to do with one another. If museums are going to become serious sites of scholarship once again, they will have to learn to lower the walls that divide them. With the right political will, this could happen most readily at universities.



18. John James or John Woodhouse Audubon, *Bat* (*Rhinopoma carolinensis?*), c. 1841, watercolor, pastel, and graphite, New-York Historical Society Museum and Library (Z.3305)



19. John James Audubon, Mounted animal specimen: Brown bat mounted to paper with brown ink inscriptions, 1849, New-York Historical Society Museum and Library (Z.3296.2)

What opportunities can be gained if collections are treated in a more fluid manner than at present? Let me give one very brief example.³⁴ The New-York Historical Society has a great collection of drawings by John James Audubon, the nineteenth-century natural history illustrator, and his son and collaborator, John Woodhouse Audubon. Having published the astonishing *Birds of America* between 1827 and 1838, the Audubons turned to American quadrupeds. My students and I were able to study drawings by the father and son, raising questions of purpose, process, and authorship. Many of their taxidermic mounts of birds and small mammals had entered the New-York Historical Society with their working sketches and drawings. However, in a fit of museum categorization according to which taxidermic mounts have no place in a *history* museum, those mounts were transferred to the American Museum of Natural History. As my students and I were pouring over various drawings by the Audubons of bats (Fig. 18), the curators opened a box and unwrapped two taxidermic mounts. They were the beautifully preserved bodies of two species of bat (Fig. 19). Suddenly, we saw the drawings of bats in a wholly different way. We were looking at two of the very bats that the Audubons had drawn right next to the drawings themselves. As luck would have it, the bats had been overlooked when the other mounts were sent to the American Museum of Natural History. It was quite clear that strict adherence to the categorization whereby drawings many regard as artworks are invariably separated from scientific specimens deprives scholars of the opportunity to view things together that in another sense belong together intimately.

One might imagine that the presence of museums of different kinds within various universities would permit a certain experimental intermingling of things from those collections. Yet this would rarely seem to be the case. The year before I taught the seminar I just described, when I was still at Harvard, my long-term collaborator, Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, and I had organized an exhibition called *Tangible Things*, also exploring categorization. The exhibition comprised 280 objects and drew on seventeen Harvard collections. We conceived the exhibition to complement a lecture course we taught together, for which all the assignments were drawn from the exhibition. As we wrote in the book that

followed, “The Tangible Things exhibition at Harvard was the most far-reaching intellectual and practical challenge yet attempted to the relative isolation of the university’s collections. It queried the very rationale that continues to structure Harvard’s—and many other—methodical collections.” We did this in the belief that the future of academic work in many fields will depend on far greater permeability among collections than is the case at present. Following our experiment in inter-collection research and teaching, we published *Tangible Things: Making History through Objects*.³⁵ However, I don’t think that Laurel Ulrich and I succeeded in breaking down inhibitions within the university regarding its collections other than temporarily.

What does this continuing state of inhibition mean for the scholars who work in university museums, and elsewhere in these universities? Universities should foster risk-taking scholarship in their museums. Inhibiting the exploration of connections among their various collections stands directly in the way of scholarly innovation. It means that the anthropologists in the anthropology museum continue to do good old safe anthropology, while the botanists in the herbarium continue to do good old safe botany, and the art historians in the art museum confine themselves to good old safe art history, all focused on their own necessarily limited array of tangible things. Although some incremental knowledge claims may result from disciplinary focus, it is hard to explore a wider world if museum scholars remain confined by the high walls of their own disciplinarily defined institutions. While many faculty scholars make unlikely, innovative connections among things and ideas, museum scholars tend to stay in one mental place, digging ever-deeper graves for themselves.

At this point, blackness seems appropriate. While some may be oblivious to this state of affairs, even coming to relish their own immediate confines, others rightly resent it, and the blame should not be laid entirely or perhaps even principally on them. Universities generally do not treat their museum scholars—by whom I mean curators, conservators, and scientists—particularly well. Few grant them the resources enjoyed by faculty. Most museum scholars work on twelve-month contracts (no summers for research), get little or no research leave, and no track to tenure.

Universities should ensure equity of standing and treatment among museum scholars and faculty, while fully expecting museum scholars to meet the requisite standards. This would place a burden on curators, conservators, and scientists in university museums, for they would have to pass successfully through that most fearsome of academic rites of passage, tenure review in North America, and its European equivalents, such as *Habilitation*. Yet certain adjustments could be made to render this more equitable: peer-reviewing museum publications and accepting them in the applicant's dossier, for instance.

What might museum scholars do in pursuit of the goal of promoting transdisciplinary and other forms of innovative scholarship across collection boundaries, whether before or after reforms of the kind I have no more than sketched? In brief, museum scholars within a university should engage in far greater exchange and collaboration among themselves and with faculty colleagues than current institutional and disciplinary categorization encourages. This will take strong leadership, as well as willingness on the part of often cowed museum scholars within universities. That leadership must come not only from the directors of university museums and collections, but from the presidents and chairs of trustees, and their equivalents, of universities as a whole.

Why on earth should they bother? The answer is simple: reputation, and survival. Drew Faust, president of Harvard University, immediately grasped that a university that makes the very best use of its museums for scholarly purposes has an advantage over competitors that do not. That competitive edge depends on treating a university's museums as a coherent whole rather than piecemeal. The first step in achieving this, as I mentioned to President Faust, is to acknowledge that any museum is, in the first instance, not a collection of things, but a community of scholars. I remain convinced that universities that invest resources in enhancing the scholarly capacity of their museums will gain an advantage in international competition.

Drew Faust is not the only university leader who has grasped the potential of university museums if only they can be coordinated, the boundaries among

them lowered, and transdisciplinary cooperation increased. Developments are occurring at the universities of Glasgow, Göttingen, and Cambridge, which, in their different ways, are providing leadership in this domain. This is all very positive, but we have no room for self-congratulation, let alone complacency. Museums of all kinds are in danger of intellectual diminution, and, in their isolation, their capacity to advance new knowledge claims is fading fast. But museums, their scholars, and their collections, can be good to think with for scholars and other thinkers beyond their walls. Our shared capacity to think creatively would be severely diminished if museums—in particular, university museums—acquiesce in being no more than sites of undergraduate and public instruction and entertainment. What do university museums know? Everything or nothing? At present, they are on their way to knowing very little, but, with care and investment in people and things, if not knowledge of everything, then at least of many things, could be in their futures.

I should like to thank Ann-Sophie Lehmann and the committee of the Gerson Lectures Foundation for the invitation to deliver this lecture. It draws on unpublished papers I gave at the Hunterian, University of Glasgow, and the Centre for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities, University of Cambridge, and I thank David Gaimster and Nicholas Thomas for their invitations. I was able to prepare this lecture during my annual visit to Göttingen as permanent senior fellow at the Lichtenberg-Kolleg (Advanced Study Institute of the Georg-August University, Göttingen), and I should like to thank its director, Martin van Gelderen, managing director, Dominik Huenniger, and their colleagues for their unstinting hospitality.

NOTES

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- 2 *Lady Bracknell*. ... I have always been of opinion that a man who desires to get married should know either everything or nothing. Which do you know?
Jack. [After some hesitation.] I know nothing, Lady Bracknell.
Lady Bracknell. I am pleased to hear it. I do not approve of anything that tampers with natural ignorance. Ignorance is like a delicate exotic fruit; touch it and the bloom is gone. The whole theory of modern education is radically unsound. Fortunately in England, at any rate, education produces no effect whatsoever (Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest: A Trivial Comedy for Serious People*, First Act, Part 2 (first produced, 1895, first published, 1899; scanned and proofed by David Price for Project Gutenberg; further proofing and conversion to web format by Jerry Stratton): <http://www.hoboes.com/FireBlade/Fiction/Wilde/earnest/act1b/> (accessed by the author, June 2, 2017).
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- 11 See, in the first instance, I. Bernard Cohen, *Some Early Tools of American Science: An account of the Early Scientific Instruments and Mineralogical and Biological Collections in Harvard University*, 1950; New York: Russell and Russell, 1967. For Winthrop's account, see John Winthrop, *Relation of a Voyage from Boston to Newfoundland, for the Observation of the Transit of Venus, June 6, 1761*, Boston: Edes and Gill, 1761.
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- John Raphael Smith after Benjamin West, *Joseph Banks*, 1773, mezzotint, British Museum, London (1841,0809.150)
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I have acquired a jpg file from the British Museum's free image website (1875 x 2500 pixels, 403 KB). It doesn't show up on the BM's image licensing site, perhaps because the image is in the public domain, and exists in multiple examples. It is also available from Wikimedia Commons (3145 x 4837 pixels; 3.32 MB):
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:John_Raphael_Smith_after_Benjamin_West_-_Mr._Banks_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg
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ISBN/EAN 978-90-821290-2-1

Cover photo by Justin Ides
Graphic design by Rudo Menge

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