

The
Museum Conscience
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THE scientific museum, the kind of museum with which my remarks here have chiefly to do, is a storehouse of facts, arranged accessibly and supported by the written records and labeled specimens to which they pertain. The purpose of a scientific museum is realized whenever some group of its contained facts is drawn upon for studies leading to publication. The investment of human energy in the formation and maintenance of a research museum is justified only in proportion to the amount of real knowledge which is derived from its materials and given to the world.

All this may seem to be innocuous platitude—but it is genuine gospel, never-the-less, worth pondering from time to time by each and every museum administrator. It serves now as a background for my further comments.

For worthy investigation based upon museum materials it is absolutely essential that such materials have been handled with careful regard for accuracy and order. To secure accuracy and order must, then, once the mere safe preservation of the collections of which he is in charge have been attended to, be the immediate aim of the curator.

Order is the key both to the accessibility of materials and to the appreciation of such facts and inferences as these materials afford. An arrange-

ment according to some definite plan of grouping has to do with whole collections, with categories of specimens within each collection, with specimens within each general category, with the card indexes, and even with the placement of the data on the label attached to each specimen. Simplicity and clearness are fundamental to any scheme of arrangement adopted. Nothing can be more disheartening to a research student, except absolute chaos, than a complicated "system," in the invidious sense of the word, carried out to the absurd limits recommended by some so-called "efficiency expert." However, error in this direction is rare compared with the opposite extreme, namely, little or no order at all.

To secure a really practicable scheme of arrangement takes the best thought and much experimentation on the part of the keenest museum curator. Once he has selected or devised his scheme, his work is not *done*, moreover, until this scheme is in operation throughout all the materials in his charge. Any fact, specimen, or record left out of order is lost. It had, perhaps, better not exist, for it is taking space somewhere; and space is the chief cost initially and currently in any museum.

The second essential in the care of scientific materials is *accuracy*. Every item on the label of each specimen, every item of the general record in

the accession catalog, must be precise as to fact. Many errors in published literature, now practically impossible to "head off," are traceable to mistakes on labels. Label-writing having to do with scientific materials is not a chore to be handed over casually to a "25-cent-an-hour" girl, or even to the ordinary clerk. To do this essential work correctly requires an exceptional genius plus training. The important habit of reading every item back to copy is a thing that has to be acquired through diligent attention to this very point. By no means *any* person that happens to be around is capable of doing such work with reliable results.

Now it happens that there is scarcely an institution in the country bearing the name museum, even though its main purpose be the quite distinct function of exhibition and popular education, that does not lay more or less claim to housing "scientific collections." Yet such a claim is false, *unless* an adequate effort has been expended both to label accurately and to arrange systematically all of the collections housed. Only when this has been done can the collections be called *in truth scientific*.

My appeal is, then, to every museum director and to every curator responsible for the proper use as well as the safe preservation of natural history specimens. Many species of vertebrate animals are disappearing; some are gone already. All that the investigator of the future will have, to indicate the

nature of such then extinct species, will be the remains of these species preserved more or less faithfully, along with the data accompanying them, in the museums of the country.

I have definite grounds for presenting this appeal at this time and in this place. My visits to the various larger museums have left me with the unpleasant and very distinct conviction that a large portion of the vertebrate collections in this country, perhaps 90 per cent of them, are in far from satisfactory condition with respect to the matters here emphasized. It is admittedly somewhat difficult for the older museums to modify systems of installation adopted at an early period. But this is no valid argument against necessary modification, which should begin at once with all the means available—the need for which should, indeed, be emphasized above the making of new collections or the undertaking of new expeditions. The older materials are immensely valuable historically, often irreplaceable. Scientific interests at large demand special attention to these materials.

The urgent need, right now, in every museum, is for that special type of curator who has ingrained within him the instinct to devise and put into operation the best arrangement of his materials—who will be alert to see and to hunt out errors and instantly make corrections—who has the *museum conscience*.

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