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A University Network on the Elephant Man

Introduction: The Network of the ULB museums

The Network of the ULB (Université Libre de Bruxelles) museums was established in May 2003 as a continuation of the 'discovery days' – aimed at the people responsible for the different museums – organised by the University Rector Pierre de Maret from February to April 2002. The Network now encompasses eleven museums on six different sites, four of them in Brussels and two in Wallonia¹.

The choice of creating a network was motivated by the need to go beyond all kinds of restricting differences: geographical dispersions, obstacles to communication and synergies between museums; differences in status (independent associations, collections linked to faculties, departments, the university itself, etc.); budget inequalities and imbalance at the level of infrastructures and human resources; and even varying aims (research, teaching, conservation or popularization). The museums involved in this process also had things in common: the university community's lack of interest or complete ignorance of these collections, the frequent lack of Scientific Committees, the absence of the museums and collections in the University's statutes or rules of procedure, for instance.

Joining forces as a Network was thus a fairly simple and practical way for the different ULB museums to overcome their differences in order to comply with their missions,

¹ In Brussels: *Centre de Recherches et d'Études technologiques des Arts plastiques, Expérimentarium, Jardin botanique Jean Massart, Musée d'Anatomie et d'Embryologie humaines, Musée-Bibliothèque Michel de Ghelderode, Musée de la Médecine, Musée des Plantes médicinales et de la Pharmacie, Muséum de Zoologie et d'Anthropologie, and the Salle Allende – Art contemporain*. In Wallonia: *Centre de Culture scientifique (Charleroi) and Écomusée du Viroin (Treignes)*. In addition to these museums, the university holds scientific collections accessible to students and researchers (mineralogy cases, map collections, etc.) and endangered collections (such as the former *Musée de la Mine et du Marbre*, casts, photographic cameras, etc.). Finally, one can mention the *Musée de la Perception et de la Cognition*, a virtual museum created in 1998.

to gather their active forces and promote collaborations and exchanges between themselves and with other institutions. Different objectives were put forward to enable this, two of which we will develop here. The first objective was to build a strong image as a Network and thereby acquire a visibility that will allow the association of museums to be known and recognised as such and participate in the University's internal and external influence. Unfortunately, whereas the Network has acquired some international recognition, this is not yet the case internally or at national level. The second objective dealt with the administrative and scientific aspects linked to the safeguarding, management and valuation of the material university heritage that the collections represent. The numerous projects² are currently in standby as the active museum figures wait for the support of the university authorities.

In order to centralize all activities, a coordination cell was created in 2003 with the Rector's backing, whose office granted it an annual budget, thereby demonstrating its support to the Network and its activities. Since then, the eleven museums have joined forces on common projects such as a presentation leaflet, a website³ or their own promotional activities, targeting the University community but also the general public. In October 2004 for instance, the 'ULB Museums Sunday' – which will be held for the fourth time on October 7 2007 – was first inaugurated. For one day, both external and internal publics can discover the riches held within the ULB museums for free and join in all kinds of activities specifically developed for that purpose: workshops, exhibitions, demonstrations, projections, etc. The Network is also an active entity in different national and international Museum associations, such as ICOM's International Committee for University Museums (UMAC)⁴.

Elephant Man, the Living Hell of Difference

In order to achieve its first objective, the Network projected to develop an exhibition with flagship objects from the different collections presented around transversal themes in order to show their pivotal role as interfaces between the different disciplines of human and exact sciences, but also between the University and the City. In fact, an additional reason to develop a collaborative exhibition was to single out and show a common identity of ULB museums among the community of Brussels museums. This first experiment took the shape of the exhibition *Elephant Man, the Living Hell of Difference*⁵, held between September and December 2006 at the Medicine Museum.

First of all, why an exhibition at the Medicine Museum? Because this institution is the only ULB museum in Brussels, capital of Europe, to be housed in a building specifically

² For instance, for the Network and Museums to obtain official recognition from the University authorities thereby acquiring a clear status; developing a set of regulations and a database for the collections, centralising some collections geographically or creating a Support Association of the Network of the ULB museums.

³ See www.ulb.ac.be/musees.

⁴ See a description of the ULB Network in „Opuscula Musealia” 15, p. 47–52.

⁵ The title was chosen after polling over 200 people of all ages, who had to sort out five different titles by order of preference (*Elephant Man. A Human among Monsters; Elephant Man. What do monsters hide?; Elephant Man. From Myth to Reality; Elephant Man, the Living Hell of Difference; Elephant Man!*).

designed for that purpose and thus with the most convenient infrastructures. Furthermore, even though it stands on the outskirts of Brussels (Erasmus Hospital/University campus), the site is easily accessible via public transportation or by car. That being said, organising an exhibition within an institution devoted to the history of medicine obviously demanded that the chosen theme relate to this discipline in one way or another.

The exhibition had a double aim: on the one hand, to demonstrate that the University Museums were able to cater for and attract the general public; on the other, to prove that museums with completely different orientations could collaborate to enrich a specific theme, even if it did not seem directly within their field. To reach the first aim, an attractive theme was obviously needed. The general public tends to snub University Museums whose identity is frequently connoted with boredom, if not downright taboo. It must be said that, to many people, a University Museum is essentially a museum of high intellectual standards and therefore not sexy in the slightest. Many academics have a tendency to forget that their role is also to share knowledge with the widest possible audience, and not flaunt it in esoteric jargon. And though the public is eager to learn, they will no doubt prefer to do so through fun and enlightening activities!

The attraction exerted on visitors by the theme of an exhibition must therefore be stronger than any psychological objection holding them back. After careful thinking and discussing, the Network chose Joseph Merrick as the pretext subject of an exhibition devoted to the theme of 'difference', a subject which is still topical as exemplified by the European Year for Handicapped People in 2003 or, closer to us, the issue of how to welcome such people in our museums. *Elephant Man* made three different generations dream, cry and wonder. Since its release in 1980, David Lynch's movie has been seen and remembered by millions of individuals. The subject was still likely to draw in the crowds (fig. 2).

As far as messages were concerned, the Network wished to make the visitors aware of and try to change their outlook towards people suffering from illnesses which deformed their bodies, sometimes to the point of repulsion. The project wanted to raise the public's awareness of the importance of the history of medicine, of its intrinsic links with the socio-economic context in which it developed as a science and of its present-day usefulness. In other words, to drive through the impact of medical research and progress which prolong life expectancy while improving the quality of life. Finally, the exhibition also dealt more concretely with different ethical problems: the greater difficulty in coping with physical than psychological anomalies, the first being immediately visible; defining what is 'normal' and what isn't; the evolution (or lack thereof) of the public's perception of physical handicaps; etc. From the perspective of form as well as content, the exhibition deliberately aimed to touch the visitor affectively, in his senses, without resorting to fantasy or voyeurism. This obviously required pedagogically and scientifically adapted support.

The recurring theme of the exhibition was then to follow the progressive humanization of Joseph Merrick, how he moves from the status of 'animal' to that of 'human being', while simultaneously accounting for his sensibility and suffering.

An interdisciplinary and multi-institutional collaboration

Along members of the ULB Museums Network, this exhibition also put to work other ‘exterior’ museums and cultural institutions. Out of the eleven ULB museums, the *Centre de Culture scientifique* – which has no collections of its own – the *Musée-Bibliothèque Michel de Ghelderode* and the *Salle Allende* were not formally associated with the project but participated at different levels, from choosing the title to the promotion. The eight other institutions were more formally involved in making the project concrete in different ways. First, the conception of both the exhibition and the educational materials were responsibility of the Network partners. Each partner selected a group of objects from their collections (scientific and technological instruments, human remains, zoological and botanical specimens, furniture, ethnographic artefacts, etc). This allowed not only to unveil the richness and diversity of ULB’s collections, but also to render more visible the heuristic importance of interdisciplinary approaches in communicating knowledge. Once the objects were selected, the Network as a whole evaluated their relevance against the museological narrative and validated the choices. The same methodology was followed for documents, label content, videos and other educational materials. The Network coordination was not only responsible for scientific content, but acted as a communication platform among the partners (transmission of messages, scheduling meetings, transfer of objects). Moreover, the coordination was also responsible for the interns contracted for the exhibition.

The budget

Conceiving such an exhibition is a costly business; and, need it be said, many University Museums run on a very tight budget. The Network thus tried to get some sponsors, both public and private, on board. Unfortunately, the quest for funding was not very successful; some potential candidates did not want to see their name associated with that of a monster (the ING bank, for instance), and most of them were a bit wary of trusting a newly-founded association which was launching its first trial project ... with no guarantees of success. A few brave sponsors from the private sector did however fund the inaugural cocktail party and advertising in the metro⁶. The Network then had to reduce costs by taking on certain tasks itself and getting support from close sources: assembling and dismantling, planning the layout, writing the explanatory notes, the press file, the pedagogical file, transport, graphic design for the leaflet and poster⁷. Certain costs, however, were inescapable, like transporting external items or printing promotional and explanatory documents. To redeem these costs, the Network decided to charge an entrance fee to the exhibition⁸. The experience was positive! No-one found the prices excessive or complained. Contrary to what is commonly believed by museum workers – and par-

⁶ 42 posters were posted inside metro trains for twelve weeks.

⁷ 2.000 posters were posted up by the Network, 10.000 postcards were handed out all over Brussels and particularly in other museums. David P., an artist, kindly designed these documents and the leaflet for free.

⁸ Adults 5 € – Seniors 4 € – Students 3 €.

ticularly University Museums- charging an entrance fee gave the exhibition more value in the public's eyes and thus attracted visitors rather than put them off.

Research

To assemble as many documents, and as complete, as possible, the Network drew up a list of essential scientific contacts: the London Hospital, where Joseph Merrick stayed and received treatment, to obtain certain medical documents or the ULB's Faculty of Medicine and the museum of Human Anatomy and Embryology, which focused more specifically on Joseph Merrick's anatomy. The Museum of Medicine conducted in-depth research into the treatments available to the London hospital at the end of the nineteenth century in order to contextualize the instruments on display, while the ULB's Faculty of Philosophy and Letters examined the Elephant Man as a literary and cinematic figure throughout the twentieth century.

The collections

80% of the objects on display came from ULB collections⁹. To fill in the gaps left by the University collections or favour comparisons, 20% of the pieces on display were retrieved from external collections. One of the major exhibits, 'le Petit Pépin' came from the Parisian Dupuytren museum, while certain objects of the Freak Show were a loan from the Brussels Fantastic Art Museum.

The Labels

Every museum involved in the exhibition wrote its own labels for the objects on loan and proofread and corrected the passages about these in wider texts, etc.

The exhibition course and its contents

Visitors need landmarks; they need to know where they stand with respect to previously acquired knowledge and what stimulates their attention. The exhibition's first room gave the visitors the essential pointers to set them on their course. It provided a historical reminder of the period the Elephant Man lived in: the Victorian era. This period was displayed in different ways. A genealogical tree of the Royal British Family helped place Queen Victoria, some explanations about the political system and important events, such as Bloody Sunday (13 November 1887), gave an idea of the political

⁹ Museum of Medicine: all the medical objects; Museum of Medicinal Plants and Pharmacy: remedies from the colonies, pharmaceutical products of the 19th century; Museum of Human Anatomy and Embryology: specimens of 'human and animal monsters'; Museum of Zoology and Anthropology: specimens of 'animal monsters'; Experimentarium: Steam engines and other tokens of Industrialisation; Botanical Gardens: spices and plants from the colonies; Viroin Ecomuseum: scenes from the 19th century (professions, street scenes, coal burners, water pumps, etc.).

context. The economic aspect and the crisis brought on by competition from Germany and North America were illustrated through the exploitation of Imperial colonies, industrialisation and the emergence of new inventions such as the steam engine. Finally the living conditions in the backstreets of Whitechapel in 19th century London were evoked through a presentation of the major scourges – typhus, cholera, syphilis, tuberculosis – and other plagues – unemployment, insalubrious conditions, alcoholism and crime. To enhance interactivity in this introductory room, the scenery was particularly well thought out and staged: visitors could walk through London streets and take in their atmosphere thanks to sets lent by the Galleries Theatre and university collections. Two famous characters were also deliberately included as landmarks for visitors at this initial stage: Jack the Ripper and Sherlock Holmes were the baits used to draw in the visitors and awaken their curiosity about that historical period.

Once the general atmosphere was set, visitors were invited to take place beneath the lights and draperies of a Freak Show (fig. 3) similar to those that could be found in the poorer areas of London or elsewhere, where they first met Joseph Merrick, the Elephant Man. Tom Norman, a show manager, exhibited the ‘creature’ in a grotty mezzanine at 123 Whitechapel Road, just a few blocks away from the London Hospital. This room was designed with the help of the Brussels Fantastic Art Museum¹⁰. In it, some of the musts of ‘monsters’ and monstrosities shown at the time were on display, ranging from the Australian Aboriginal to pure inventions such as the Fidji mermaid of the Barnum Circus, taking in the mummified bodies of Siamese brothers Giovanni and Giacomo Tocci, along the way.

The third room, entirely devoted to Joseph Merrick, brought visitors back to a more sober atmosphere and breached issues linked to the Elephant’s Man particular pathology. To remain within everyone’s scope of understanding, simple sketches, x-rays, diagrams and pictures were used; a comparison between a reconstitution of Merrick’s skeleton and another ‘healthy’ one helped illustrate overly complex medical terms. Furthermore, to develop a theme such as ‘difference’ is no easy challenge; for the public to perceive it immediately, it was decided, as explained above, to show the most salient type of difference, the one that can be seen with the naked eye: physical difference.

Cases with human and animal monsters on display created a transition between the sensationalism of the Freak Show and the simplified scientific explanations about pathological anatomy.

Through the roundabout angle of this very particular branch of medicine, visitors were then introduced to the history of medicine in the 19th century. A reconstruction of Joseph Merrick’s room at the back of the London Hospital (fig. 4) then led into his physician’s cabinet. From 1884 onwards, Dr Frederick Treves described the Elephant Man’s symptoms and convinced the hospital board to give permanent accommodation to his patient in 1886. The objects shown here were a mix of elements from Merrick’s biography, such as the church model he made, and medical instruments of the day, such as a stethoscope, an electrocardiogram, an auscultation table, various surgical instruments, an anaesthetic mask, endoscopes, etc.

¹⁰ In 2002, this museum had also devoted an exhibition to Joseph Merrick: *The Elephant Man. Anatomy of a monster*.

Facing these reconstructions, other cases dealt with Merrick's impressive pathology, which was long labelled 'Von Recklinghausen's neurofibromatosis', a rare hereditary disease which provoked the formation of large deforming neurofibromas in skin and bones. In 1996, during the annual meeting of the Radiological Society of North America in Chicago, the radiologist Amita Sharma (Harvard University) made a new diagnosis about Merrick's disease: it is the 'Proteus Syndrome', known since 1979 and in which asymmetrical hypertrophy of limbs and skull, the presence of moles and various vascular tumours are characteristic. The Proteus Syndrome is probably due to mosaicism, i.e. the coexistence of 'mutated' and 'normal' cell populations.

The phenomenon of the Elephant Man then led on to teratology or 'monster science' which appears in the 19th century with Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire. After a historical overview of the discipline, human specimens were displayed to illustrate different malformations: an anencephalous specimen next to janiceps conjoined twins (fig. 5), a cyclotocephalous specimen alongside craniopagus and thoracopagus conjoined twins¹¹. Without forgetting the aforementioned 'le Petit Pépin' and his skeleton which brought the teratological samples to a close. This section of the exhibition also proposed an overview of how the term 'monster' had evolved over the centuries. For thousands of years the 'monster' was simply someone different, non-standard – midget, giant, obese, hermaphrodite, etc. But in the medical field, the term is currently used for a child who suffers from a congenital lethal malformation. This does not stop the sufferer from being excluded, especially as the word is commonly used nowadays to describe murderers or paedophiles, such as Marc Dutroux or Michel Fourniret.

To provide the public with different analytical perspectives and eventually help them conceive of Elephant Man as a human being, the last room dealt with the character's mythical aspect as exemplified through literature (Montagu or Treves¹²), theatre (Pomerance¹³), cinema (Lynch), comic books (Moore and Campbell¹⁴), opera (Petitgirard¹⁵) and all the other artists who were inspired by this touching figure. The trailer of Lynch's movie was shown on a loop and many movie-club screenings were organized to allow numerous visitors to watch the film again. Last but not least, before exiting the exhibition, the public could test its knowledge and shed its preconceptions with a true or false exercise, or undergo an experiment which made them face difference and the unknown¹⁶ and leave their opinion about 'difference' in a 'word box'. The success of these interactive suggestions demonstrated that it was important for the visitors to participate actively and leave behind a trace, in whichever shape, of their visit.

¹¹ Anencephaly: Serious and lethal malformation where the brain has not developed; janiceps conjoined twins: in this very rare malformation, the sufferer, like the god Janus, has two diametrically opposed faces each of which has two fused hemifaces; cyclotocephaly: very rare and lethal malformation which associates a cyclopia (only one eye) and an otocephaly (oral cavity replaced by the ears); craniopagus and thoracopagus conjoined twins: linked together respectively by cranium or thorax.

¹² A. Montagu, F. Treves, *The Elephant Man: A Study in Human Dignity*, Acadian House; F. Treves, *The Elephant Man and other memories*, 1923.

¹³ B. Pomerance, *Elephant Man*, 1977.

¹⁴ A. Moore, E. Campbell, *From Hell*, Delcourt, 2000.

¹⁵ L. Petitgirard, *Joseph Merrick aka Elephant Man*, 1998.

¹⁶ For instance, the visitors could try on a glove which reproduced Joseph Merrick's hypertrophied hand and try to grab simple objects such as a fork.

A convincing experience!

The exhibition was an undeniable success, both with the general public and the media. The event attracted over 7000 visitors, or twenty times as many as the Museum of Medicine without any exhibition over a similar period (350 visitors)¹⁷. Enthusiasts came from everywhere: primary and secondary schools, higher teaching institutions, families, individuals. The public success was in part due to media coverage. The interest in the subject of the exhibition was so strong that a simple letter was enough to incite media coverage from the French-speaking written press, televisions and radios; but also some Flemish – and even French-newspapers and radios.

Collaborative projects are not always simple, but the case presented here shows that it is possible to bring such endeavours to life as long as the objectives are clearly stated right from the start and all partners agree and abide by them. Because of its role and mode of functioning, the Network of the ULB Museums managed to overcome the obstacle that diverse and different partners working on a common project sometimes constitutes. What's more, the exhibition and its key figure Joseph Merrick, managed to illustrate how research and new findings can bring into question scientific knowledge which is often taken for granted by the general public. More importantly, for those who still question the usefulness of maintaining collections – in universities or elsewhere... – Merrick's case was able to be re-examined because his bones and prints are still kept at the London Hospital¹⁸, along with Frederick Treves's notes! Let this be a lesson to all those who think university collections are outdated, bulky and useless...

STRESZCZENIE

Wystawa sieci uniwersyteckiej muzeów dotycząca tematu człowieka-słonia

Po krótkiej prezentacji sieci muzeów na Wolnym Uniwersytecie Brukseli (ULB) zorganizowanym w 2006 r. pierwszą wspólną wystawą muzeów ULB jest wystawa na temat „fizycznej różnicy”, której kluczową postacią był człowiek-słoń, czyli Joseph Merrick. Ta współpraca grupy muzeów miała dwa cele: primo, wykazać, że uniwersyteckie muzea są zdolne do przyciągnięcia i utrzymania dużej liczby zwiedzających, secundo, pokazać, jak różne w swym profilu i charakterze muzea potrafią wspólnie tworzyć jeden projekt. Temat

¹⁷ The Museum's opening hours had been adapted to match those of other Belgian public museums: from Tuesday to Sunday (closed on Mondays). From a financial point of view, the flow of visitors enabled the exhibition to generate profit, despite the costs linked to printing visual aids or transporting external collections.

¹⁸ During World War Two, skin samples preserved in alcohol were transferred to the Bernhard Baron Institute of Pathology. Some of the Institute's buildings were destroyed during the «blitz» and the anatomic material that was kept there unfortunately lost.

„fizycznej różnicy” był centralny i przypadek człowieka-słonia nadal przyciągał tłumy. Poza poruszaniem etycznych kwestii, jak definicja „normalności” i percepcji fizycznej niepełnosprawności, wystawa podkreśliła wagę historii medycyny i wpływ badań medycznych na polepszenie warunków życia. Ta międzydyscyplinarna i wieloinstytucyjna wystawa odniosła wielki sukces: odwiedziło ją około 7000 zwiedzających w ciągu trzech miesięcy i wywołała duże zainteresowanie prasy.