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Museums and the Advancement of Natural History in Europe from the Early Modern Period to the Present

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Abstract. Natural history museums stand as central institutions of modern science and public culture, yet the interplay between their material advancement and intellectual paradigm shifts remains insufficiently integrated in existing historical scholarship, which often prioritizes either institutional progress or critical critique in isolation. This paper outlines the evolution of European natural history museums from the 1500s to the present day. It argues that natural history study has steadily made advances for five hundred years. Museums have collected bigger collections, developed better preservation practices, and gained greater public accessibility. At the same time, natural history has had several complete turns about its core ideas and research methods, in which ideas that once seemed foolproof were almost entirely rejected. The paper traces the shift from private curiosity cabinets to modern museums that are public institutions. The paper concludes that tangible institutional progress and radical conceptual reversals are not mutually exclusive, but intertwined dynamics that have jointly redefined the identity and mission of museums across each era. It divides its history into five periods: early modern cabinets, Enlightenment public foundations, nineteenth-century evolutionary reform, early twentieth-century professionalization, and recent critical skepticism. All analyses are based on published historical research or verified institutional records.

Keywords: European museums, natural history, cabinets of curiosities, conceptual reversal, museum history

1. Introduction

Most people view natural history museums as quiet and stable. They walk through halls of stuffed animals and labeled fossils. They think these exhibitions depict fixed, unchanging truths about nature. This common view misses two important aspects of real museum history. First, over hundreds of years, museums have made clear, steady progress. They grew from small private rooms into large public buildings. They developed more reliable conservation practices. They opened their doors to wider and wider groups of people. Second, the underlying ideas of museum work have undergone exactly the opposite shifts several times. Ideas that once seemed obviously true were entirely dismissed later. Museums had to relabel, rearrange, and rethink everything on display.

This paper examines this double pattern in European history. It begins with the early modern private collections in the sixteenth century. It moves through the Enlightenment age of public

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museums. It covers the revolution brought about by evolutionary theory in the nineteenth century. It moves on to the early twentieth-century growth in professional practice in museums. It ends with recent changes from the 1970s to the present day. The paper also draws on two important definitions. Progress is defined as genuine, measurable improvement in knowledge, quality of preservation, and public access. Progress means more complete records, safer preservation, and wider use of museum resources. Conceptual reversal is defined as a wholesale move from a widely held picture of the world to a wholly different picture. A reversal happens when nearly everyone abandons a core idea and embraces an opposite idea.

This paper concerns only Western and Central European natural history museums. It does not cover art museums, history museums, or natural history museums outside Europe. It uses peer-reviewed books and journal articles in the history of museums. All specific assertions can be traced back to cited texts.

2. Early modern cabinets of curiosities (1550–1720)

The direct ancestors of modern natural history museums were what are now called cabinets of curiosities. Cabinets of curiosities were prevalent throughout Europe in the 1500s. They grew hand-in-hand with the new age of world exploration. European ships visited new continents and carried home unknown plants, animals, and minerals. Wealthy and educated people collected them to learn about nature.

These collections belonged to a small number of people. Most owners were wealthy nobles, university professors, medical doctors, or rich merchants. Ordinary people were not free to visit these collections. They usually needed a personal invitation from the owner to visit. Most owners collected objects for their own study and enjoyment. They also used their collections to show their wealth and wisdom to other powerful people. Each cabinet contained a very mixed group of objects. Owners stored natural and man-made objects in the same room. Natural objects included rocks, shells, dried flowers, stuffed birds and animals, and fossil fragments [1]. Man-made objects included rare coins, exotic crafts, small works of art, and ancient objects. Owners did not treat natural objects and man-made objects differently. They arranged the objects to show surprising connections and strange rarities.

The main organizing idea came from the Great Chain of Being. This belief taught that all nature formed a single fixed hierarchy. God had created all things in a perfect ranked order. That order ran from rocks at the bottom, up through plants, animals, humans, angels, and to God at the top. Collectors were searching for things that appeared to fill gaps in this chain. They valued strange and rare objects that provided a hidden connection between different natural groups. For example, a shell that looked like a rock seemed to link minerals to living things. Such odd objects were the most prized contents of most cabinets.

Even in this period, there was real practical progress that would benefit future museum work. Collectors formed wide trade networks across Europe and overseas. They traded specimens with other collectors in different cities. Dutch and Portuguese merchants had ships taking new specimens from Asia, Africa, and the Americas. Collectors exchanged letters and descriptions of new finds. These trade networks made the first continent-wide system of trade in natural history objects. Collectors also made meticulous visual and textual records. They employed artists to illustrate every interesting specimen. They published catalogs of their collections. These catalogs listed all the objects in them, with a brief description of each. Some catalogs contained page numbers and indexes. Worm's museum catalog, for example, listed over two thousand different objects. These catalog systems offered later museum workers a basic model for collections management.

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Yet this period also brought the first major conceptual reversal in natural history. At the start of the era, many collectors disagreed over the nature of fossils. Many people thought fossils were "sports of nature." They believed stones grew into shapes resembling bones or shells by accident. They thought fossils were formed inside rocks and had nothing to do with living creatures. Other collectors thought fossils were the remains of dead animals, but they could not prove it clearly.

By the late 1600s, researchers could see this kind of clear evidence in the rock layers. The Danish scientist Niels Stensen, also known as Steno, examined rocks in Italy. He showed that rock layers formed in a series over time. He demonstrated that fossils of shells in rocks come from real sea animals. The animals were buried in mud that later turned to rock. Other researchers found similar evidence across Europe.

This change completely reversed the purpose of collections of fossils. Before the change, fossil collectors preserved fossils as crazy mineral curiosities. After the change, they preserved fossils as records of life in the past on Earth. Cabinets started separating fossil objects from other minerals. They started arranging fossils by type and age rather than by shape and strangeness. This was the first case of a full conceptual shift in Europe in natural history [2].

Many famous collections illustrate these patterns plainly. Ole Worm ran a famous museum in Copenhagen, Denmark. Worm was a medical doctor and professor. His collection filled an entire house. His collection housed stuffed animals, fossils, minerals, and human curiosities. Worm carefully cataloged each item with detailed notes. He also allowed selected students and visitors to view his collection. Portions of his collection were part of the Danish national museum. The imperial collection of Rudolf II in Prague was one of the largest in Europe. Rudolf was the Holy Roman Emperor. He collected thousands of natural objects and art objects. He recruited full-time curators to manage his collections. After Rudolf's death, the collection was divided and transported to different towns. Many natural history specimens went to the museums of the state in Vienna.

Ulisse Aldrovandi built a big collection at the University of Bologna in Italy. He was a professor of natural history. His collection included more than 7,000 dry plant specimens. He also kept hundreds of animal and mineral specimens. His collection was one of the first collections of natural history at a university in Europe. It was used as a display for medical students. In England, John Tradescant and his son collected a famous collection in London. They traveled across Europe and brought plants and animals back from rare places. Their collection was the foundation of the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford.

One big limit remained throughout the whole of this era. Access was very narrow. Only educated, wealthy people could see most collections. Most working-class people were not allowed inside. Most museums did not allow women visitors. Collections served the owner and a small social elite. This limit did not change until the eighteenth century.

3. The Enlightenment: classification and public museums (1720–1800)

Eighteenth-century progress in natural history collections was steady and far-ranging. Overseas expeditions accelerated. Ships from Britain, France, Holland, and Sweden traveled to all continents. They shipped thousands of new plant, animal and mineral species back home. These new objects filled collections across Europe. Universities and royal gardens employed more full-time curators. Curators invented improved ways to store collections. They began to attach a known provenance to every specimen. Small steps like these made collections far more reliable and more useful for research.

Before the 1730s, natural history had a major problem. There was no common system to name and group species. Different countries named the same plant or animal differently. A single plant

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could have ten different common names across five different countries in Europe. Researchers could not readily compare the work of different people. Classification of species depended on the overall similarity of a thing and personal judgment. Different collectors arranged their collections in quite different orders.

However, the most important new tool of the century was Carl Linnaeus's classification system. Linnaeus was a Swedish botanist. In 1735, he published the first edition of Systema Naturae. Linnaeus gave each known species a two-part Latin name. The first part showed the genus, or wider grouping. The second part showed the genus's specific species. He grouped species into genera, genera into orders, orders into classes, and classes into kingdoms. This system gave researchers in Europe one universal language. A botanist in Italy understood exactly which plant a colleague in Sweden was talking about. Museums could rearrange their collections in one standard order. Museum curators could compare specimens from different museums directly. It was a huge step forward for organized scientific research.

However, this system caused a big conceptual upset. The old Great Chain of Being system depicted nature as a single ranked ladder. Every living creature had a fixed and permanent position either higher up or lower than all others. Linnaeus's system depicted species as different and distinct components of nested groupings. It did not rank species as higher or lower in a single line. Instead, species were grouped together by shared physical features. Many established naturalists contended with the new system for decades. They thought it did not acknowledge the deeper order of nature. They were happier with the old ranked model. But the practical advantages of the system were irresistible. Museums could display their collections much more easily. Researchers could publish and share results more easily. By the 1780s, nearly every major European collection had reorganized its main display around Linnaean categories [3].

Not all countries welcomed Linnaeus's system. In France, for example, the naturalist Georges-Louis Leclerc, also known as Buffon, led a different way. He worked at the royal garden in Paris. Buffon argued that classification should be based on overall biology and behavior, not just a few surface characteristics. He also wrote a huge multi-volume series of natural histories for the general reader. His work made natural history popular with a wider audience. French museums followed Buffon's ideas for many decades before they embraced Linnaean categories totally. This difference helped produce two separate traditions in the practice of museums in Europe.

This period also saw the rise of the first real public museums. Before this time, almost all collections were private. The Enlightenment opened new eyes on public knowledge and citizen learning. Leaders and scholars argued that natural history collections should benefit the public, not just other collectors.

The Ashmolean Museum in Oxford opened in 1683. Many historians claim this to be the first museum with regular paid admission for the general public. It was the collection of John Tradescant. It charged a small admission fee. It opened on most days for any visitor who could pay. Visitors did not need an invitation from someone personally. Visitor records early on show shopkeepers, craftsmen, and even some working people visiting the museum. The Ashmolean hosted one of the first public lecture series on natural history. It was an early prototype of the idea of a museum for the general public [4].

The French National Museum of Natural History opened in 1793 during the French Revolution. Before the revolution, the royal garden and its collections belonged to the king. Revolutionary leaders took the royal collections from the private palaces of the elite. They portrayed these objects as public property. They said that the museum should educate all citizens of the new republic. The museum employed full-time curators and researchers. It opened its galleries to the public for free

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several days a week. The museum soon became one of the largest and most impressive natural history museums in Europe.

Another quiet and important reversal occurred in exhibition goals. Earlier cabinets were used for private study and elite diversion only. Collectors displayed the rarest and most shocking objects to entertain visitors. Enlightenment museum leaders said their primary mission was rational public education. Curators arranged specimens to display clear, organized natural systems. They grouped objects by category of science, not by rarity or shock. They moved strange, "wonder-only" objects to side rooms or storage. They no longer put the most striking objects in the main galleries. This reversal changed the fundamental role of public exhibition. Museums stopped being places of wonder first. They became places of orderly instruction first.

Even progress had limits. Many "public" museums still allowed entry on some days only. Working-class visitors could be turned away for out-of-season dress code requirements or entry prohibitions. Most museums still did not allow children to enter unaccompanied by an adult. Classification had its unexamined cultural assumptions. Curators still lined up human groups side by side with animals in displays. This practice reflected common racial thinking. Later generations would reject it altogether.

4. The nineteenth century: evolution and institutional growth (1800–1900)

The 1800s saw huge growth for European natural history museums. Cities across Europe erected large new buildings for museum construction. Nations funded museums as symbols of national pride and national scientific strength. London, Paris, Berlin, Vienna, and Copenhagen opened grand new natural history museums. Collections expanded rapidly on the back of colonial expeditions and local expeditions. Curators developed better taxidermy and preservation techniques for fossils. Museums were institutions of public science at the core of society.

Earlier museums were in old palaces or converted houses. In the nineteenth century, the first buildings designed specifically as natural history museums appeared. The natural history section of the British Museum moved to a new building in South Kensington, London, in 1881. The building was big, with large high-ceilinged halls, glass skylights, and gallery spaces specially allocated to the display. It exhibited millions of specimens. The building was deliberately impressive. Its architecture showed science as an important national institution.

Paris grew its national natural history museum over several big buildings. Berlin built a grand new museum in the center of the city. Vienna moved its imperial natural history collection to a massive new palace-style building. The new buildings had large departments for botany, zoology, geology, and paleontology. Each department had its own halls, storerooms, and laboratories. Specialization was a step forward for museums.

Collections grew at an unprecedented pace. Most European states controlled large colonial empires. They dispatched scientific expeditions to colonies in Africa, Asia, and the Americas. These expeditions collected thousands of plant, animal, and fossil specimens. They shipped these specimens back to museums in Europe. For example, the Challenger expedition of the 1870s sailed around the world and collected more than 4,000 marine species. These specimens went to the British Museum and other museums. Colonial collecting gave European museums unprecedented collections. But it also created enduring problems. Most expeditions took samples from local areas without consent, did not share the knowledge or benefits of their findings with local communities, and usually omitted any information about the full context of sampling at local collections. These colonial origins would be part of the debate for many years to come [5].

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Evolutionary theory was the biggest intellectual event of the century. Charles Darwin published On the Origin of Species in 1859. He argued that species changed over time by natural selection. He showed that all organisms had a common ancestor. Before Darwin, most naturalists had believed that species were static and unchanging. They had thought that each species had been created separately. Evolutionary theory created the greatest conceptual disturbance in the natural history of the century. Museum displays had been designed to reflect the fixed order of creation. Curators arranged species to show separate and fixed groups. After Darwin, they had to reorder almost everything all over again. They began to show lines of descent and change over time. Fossil exhibits shifted from static visual curiosities to evidence of past life and change. They showed how ancient species turned into modern species.

However, this reversal did not take place at once. Many senior curators did not come around to evolution in the decades after Darwin published his book. Some museums retained old creation-based displays until the 1890s [6]. The British Museum kept mixed displays for almost twenty years after Darwin's book. There were debates between evolution supporters and opponents in natural history museum lecture halls across Europe. By the end of the century, almost all of the leading European natural history museums had taken up evolution. The century also provided clear advances in public access. Most of the large museums dropped their entry restrictions. They opened free admission days for working people. For instance, the British Museum allowed free entry on Sundays and holidays. Working-class families could enter for free. Museums added public lectures and group-guided visits. They also employed professional lecturers to introduce displays to ordinary visitors. Museums were important sites for popular science education.

Initially, school groups started visiting museums regularly. Teachers brought classes along to see natural history displays. Museums produced special handbooks for school children. They were introducing natural history to people who had never before had access to it. Museum display techniques also improved. Curators developed improved techniques for taxidermy of animals. Stuffed animals looked much more real than in earlier centuries. Museums began to display animals in natural poses, rather than just lining them up in rows. Fossil skeletons were mounted in lifelike poses. This made displays much more interesting for ordinary visitors.

One other problem swam with the progress. Most museum collections were reliant on colonial collecting. European expeditions extracted specimens from colonies all over the world. They often did so without local consent or benefit. Thousands of animal and plant species and fossils were shipped from Africa, Asia, and the Americas to Europe. The problem remained largely unacknowledged for more than a century. The museums presented their collections as discrete scientific materials—there was no discussion about power in the background of the collections.

5. The early twentieth century: professionalization and ecology (1900–1970)

There was continued progress in museum practice in the early 1900s. Museums became more professional and organized. Curators gave up the hobbyist collector role and took on the role of trained scientific experts. Museums split into more specialized departments. Research became more organized. Public programs extended to more visitors. New exhibit display technologies created more lively, simple exhibits. At the same time, another significant conceptual reversal occurred, and museum research took on a new focus. Before the 1900s, many curators were wealthy amateurs or self-taught collectors. Some curators did not have any scientific training. In the mid-1900s, most curators had university degrees in biology, geology, or another science. Curators followed normal scientific methods for preparing, storing, and cataloging specimens. Museums divided curators,

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collection managers, educators, exhibit makers and others into clear job roles. Professionalization made museum activities more reliable and consistent.

Museums also split into increasingly specific departments. Earlier museums had just a few general sections. By the middle of the 1900s, large museums had separate departments for mammals, birds, insects, plants, invertebrates, minerals, and paleontology. Each department had its own staff and its own research program [7]. This specialization allowed deeper, more specific research. Scientists could research tiny subsets in more detail than they could by looking at all of natural history broadly. Museums also expanded their public programs greatly. They offered regular school tours. They added dedicated children's galleries with hands-on exhibits. They showed regular temporary special exhibits on specific themes. Special exhibitions drew large audiences, bringing new kinds of visitors into museums.

One of the most fashionable new display tools was the diorama. A diorama showed stuffed animals in front of realistic painted backgrounds. These reconstructed an entire natural setting. A curator collaborated with an artist to produce a scene as accurate as possible. Dioramas made natural history seem real and alive for ordinary visitors. They became the most successful feature of many natural history museums [8]. Museums also used films and slide shows in exhibits. They showed short entertaining films in little film theatres. The films showed animals living in their natural environments. They allowed visitors to see animal behavior that could not be seen with stuffed specimens. These new media made museums a more attractive public showcase.

Yet this period also saw another major conceptual reversal. Before 1900, most museum research was about naming and classifying new species. This work was called taxonomy. Curators spent most of their time describing new specimens and putting them in the correct group. The main aim was to complete a full catalog of all the species on the planet. By the middle of the 1900s, research topics changed. Researchers were less interested in just describing and naming new species. They became more interested in how living things interacted with each other and their surroundings. This field was called ecology. Ecologists studied food webs, population trends, and animal behavior. They asked questions about the workings of an ecosystem.

It also changed museum work deeply. Curators spent less time grouping specimens in drawers. They spent more time in the field doing field studies and ecological research. Many old taxonomic collections were stored away. New public displays of collections concerned ecosystems and environmental themes rather than rows of named specimens. Museums continued to do taxonomic work, but it was no longer the main focus of research [9].

Preservation technologies also improved steadily. Museums started to develop better climate control for storage rooms. They controlled temperature and humidity to slow down the decay of specimens. They started using new chemicals to protect specimens from mold and pests. These methods greatly extended the lifetime of collections. Many collections gathered in the 1800s are still in good condition today because of the improved methods.

After the 1960s, museums started to use early computer systems for records of collections. Museums replaced the handwritten catalog cards with databases. Databases made collection information far easier to search and to share. This shift was the birth of the digital era for museums.

The two world wars temporarily damaged the progress of museums. During both World War I and World War II, many museums closed their galleries to the public. Many museums took their valuable specimens out of the cities to places of safe storage. Some museums had buildings damaged or destroyed by bombing. Many curators quit to serve in the military. After each war, museums rose and reopened. They expanded their collections and programs again. Wars slowed progress, but they did not stop it.

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One blind spot to this whole period was that most museums did not question their colonial past. Museums presented their collections as impartial scientific material. They did not discuss how and where many specimens were collected. Displays preserved a Eurocentric picture of the natural world. Museums rarely provided local views from other parts of the world. Questions of colonial justice did not come into mainstream discussions of museums until some decades later.

6. Late twentieth to twenty-first century: contemplation and reckoning (1970–present)

Beginning in the 1970s, museums made more progress on both access and technology. They opened up more public space. They added more interactive exhibits. They put collection catalogs online, and others could view them. Digital imaging enabled researchers to study specimens without handling them. Such changes made museums more open and more useful than ever before. At the same time, another major conceptual turn reversed the original purpose of museums. Museums moved from their notion of being neutral authorities to something like critical self-examination.

Digital technology changed the way museums work. For example, museums scanned their collection catalogs and put them online. Anyone with Internet access could search millions of specimen records. They could see pictures and descriptions of specimens from home—without ever visiting the museum. With high-quality digital cameras, researchers were able to examine tiny details on a specimen. They were able to take a look at fossils and insects without actually touching the real things. These new tools opened the doors of museum collections to researchers everywhere [10]. Museums also introduced more interactive exhibits. Older displays had been more static cases with labels to read. New displays featured interactive touchscreen kiosks, interactive models, and games. People could interact with exhibits instead of just looking at them. Museums made more exhibits available for children and families. These are all changes that made museums more welcoming, open, and accessible.

Woven into all of this were advances in museum research. Scientists still find new species in museum collections each year. Old specimens contain deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA) evidence that was not obtainable a century ago. New imaging techniques show what is inside fossils without harm to them. They make whole new areas of research possible. Museum collections remain to this day some of the best sources for modern science.

But this period also saw the latest big conceptual reversal. For almost two hundred years, museums understood themselves as neutral authorities. They dealt in facts. They considered facts objective and unquestionable. Curators played the role of a teacher who simply conveyed orthodox knowledge to museum visitors. They never questioned their own relevance to society.

Starting in the 1970s, scholars and activists questioned this view. They noted that museums had been involved in state power and in colonial exploitation. They noted that museum displays showed cultural bias, not pure nature. They noted that museums had contributed to colonial domination by promoting Europeans' views of nature as true nature. This critique came from university history departments, indigenous rights organizations, and environmental movements. These changes spread to most European museums. Museums started to acknowledge their colonial heritage. They introduced additional labels regarding how the specimens were collected. They started repatriating some human remains and cultural artifacts to Indigenous people. For example, many British and French museums gave back ancestral remains to Indigenous people in Australia and North America. These returns came after new national laws and ethics rules.

Museums also contributed more diverse voices to exhibits. They included perspectives from communities in local areas around Europe. They abandoned a single European version of natural history. They started speaking about the environmental crisis and the human contribution to nature.

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Many have big displays about climate change and biodiversity loss. Some traditional museum supporters resist these trends. They say museums are abandoning science for politics. They say museums need to deal only with facts, not social problems. But the changes moved ahead. By the 2020s, the majority of big European national history museums had adopted some kind of self-critical practice.

That reversal has redefined the core mission of a museum for the second time [11]. Throughout most of the twentieth century, the aim of museums was to instruct the public about existing natural facts. Today, many museums see themselves differently. They aim to inspire questioning about nature and human society. They act as debating grounds for topics such as climate change, biodiversity loss, and environmental injustice. They work with local communities to co-create exhibits. Museums also take on more activist roles. Many museums today publicly endorse action on climate change. They organize conservation programs in partnership with field scientists. They draw on their collections to monitor changes in the environment over time. This new role is very different from the neutral teaching role of the past.

However, this period of change still has limits. Repatriation of collections is slow and controversial. Many museums still hold large numbers of specimens collected during the colonial period. More access is online, but many collections are still not fully available online. Funding pressures often mean that few new programs are funded. Museums continue to struggle to reach working-class and minority groups in Europe.

7. Conclusion

This paper has followed European natural history museum development over almost five centuries. This record clearly shows evidence of steady progress. Collections have grown from small private cabinets into huge public museums. Preservation techniques have improved from simple drying and stuffing to sophisticated climate control and image digitalization. Public access has expanded from a small elite to almost all members of society. Scientific knowledge has become more detailed, more reliable, and wider. At the same time, the record clearly shows repeated conceptual reversals. The Great Chain of Being yielded to Linnaean classification; fixed creationism gave way to evolutionary theory; taxonomic orientation gave way to ecological study; the notion of neutral scientific authority yielded to critical scientific self-critique. In each case, core ideas once thought unshakeable were overturned, and museums had to reorganize their collections and reorient their mission.

This double pattern is the gist of museum history. Progress does not mean a straight line of advance. Knowledge advances, but it also takes turns. Museums grow and improve, but they also redefine what their work is. That mixture of progress and revolution will also continue into the future. Museums will continue to make new scientific discoveries. They will also continue to question their assumptions and the role they play in society.

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