

THE MUSEUM OF NATURAL SCIENCES OF BOGOTÁ

Brother Roque Casallas Lasso

A short history.

On the 19 March, 1890 there arrived in Colombia the first group of de La Salle brothers. Among these men, all of whom were French, was a group of natural historians, who immediately began an systematic study of the unique flora and fauna of Colombia. Their efforts resulted in the museum of natural sciences named the De La Salle Museum.

Brother Apolinar María (Nicolás Seiller), was one of these early brothers, who while he was still sailing to his destination up the Magdalena River, managed to collect a few insects and plants which were to become the first specimens in the huge collection which later formed the De La Salle Museum.

Another was Brother Ariste José (Maurice Rollot), who discovered several important animal fossils in the savannah of Bogotá, Huila, Pensilvania and Guasca.

Finally we shall mention Brother Nicéforo María (Antoine Rouhaire), who by his persistent efforts throughout a lifetime, managed to make the museum known worldwide.

On the 10 April, 1948 this museum, which in some sense had become the pride of Bogotá, was ransacked, set on fire and reduced to ashes by an ignorant mob of fanatics in protest at the death of the leader Jorge Eliécer Gaitán.

Nothing daunted, Brother Nicéforo, assisted by several of his fellow de La Salle brothers and other friends interested in his scientific work, calmly began rebuilding the museum, so that it gradually became once more a place that foreign and local scientists and students could not afford to miss.

In fact the museum is now known in science centres throughout the world. It is the result of a hundred

years of careful study and research, of tireless expeditions throughout the country and long hours spent on taxidermy and on classifying thousands of fauna and flora specimens. Today it houses scientific treasures which cannot be underestimated.

The various sections of the museum

The museum consists of two parts:

- One where the exhibits are, and which is open to the general public. This is the most attractive section and occupies the greater part of the museum.
- The other part is reserved for scientific research. It is sufficiently out of the way for quiet investigations to take place and it has an ample supply of all the material needed for this work. The public do not visit this section. It has a very rich collection of flora and fauna to itself.

The Museum is housed in a four-floored building; three of these floors can be visited, starting at the bottom floor.

A. EXHIBITION SECTION

On the third floor are housed samples connected with:

1. Mineralogy, including meteorites and fossils.

Among the latter, of special interest are mastodons; the American horse, a unique and complete example; various megatherions and glyptodons; and fossilised wood.

2. Ophidians

The huge snakes of the Eastern planes and of the Amazon region are worth mentioning, as are the anacondas (one of up to 20 metres in length) and the solenoglyphes (which disable their victims with their poison)

3. African Fauna

Here we have examples of apes, dromedaries, zebras, giraffes, antelopes, gazelles, leopards, lions, Abyssinian tigers, Moroccan moufflons etc.

4. Turtles and tortoises

There are examples from dry land, from swamps, from fresh and sea water.

5. Alligators and crocodiles.

There are samples of various sizes.

6. Ictiology

Sea fish (several kinds of shark, etc), fresh water fish, especially from Colombia (piranha, electric eels, rayfish.)

7. Echinoderms and crustaceans,

A very wide selection.

8. Australian fauna,

For example the platypus, kangaroo, echidna etc.

On this floor is a very interesting show case with samples of congenital malformation of animals.

Objects of special interest on the second floor are:

- a section on South American monkeys
- insects of every kind, but especially butterflies.;
- ornithology (a splendid variety)
- mammals from the Llanos Orientales or Eastern planes of Colombia.
- Mammals from the North Pole.

On the first floor there are exhibits as follows:

- Mammals from the South Pole:
- the African ostrich.
- carnivores from South America (jaguars, panthers, pumas, different kinds of tiger, the black or "ugly" bear, the only one existing in South America;)
- marsh birds
- vultures...

Educational objectives.

The exhibition section is especially for school children. Lots of groups from schools in the capital and from other cities of the country come to the museum to review what they have learned and to see samples.

A printed guide to the museum points out the peculiarities of each of the specimens. The student can check what he studied in text books, by examining the exhibits. There is also a questionnaire available to help the young student to notice the characteristics of each sample and to compare them with the knowledge he has acquired in school. In this way he is able to review what he has learned and learn what he does not yet know.

There are videos also, giving the history of the museum and the work of those who gradually set it up. Students also get to know the Institute of the brothers, Saint John Baptist de La Salle, and the brothers' work and mission in the church.

B. RESEARCH SECTION:

This section helps on the one hand in continuing the work of research for the museum itself, extending and completing the work undertaken by so many de La Salle brothers, who were real specialists in the natural sciences. The work begun in 1904 has thus become internationally known.

On the other hand, it also helps the research of a great number of scientists who come to the museum to complete their work. They come in fact from several

countries for this. There are also a great number of scientists who continue written correspondence with the authorities of the museum on a regular basis to obtain fresh information and to consult them on scientific matters.

In order to pass on information concerning the work of students and researchers the museum publishes several scientific journals which are read both nationally and internationally.

For further information you are invited to read a work by Professor Héctor López on "The contribution of the de La Salle brothers to the natural sciences in Colombia"

Statistics of the museum:

As a final piece of information we list some statistics on the museum.

Botany:	10.000 exhibits.
Zoology:	
Ornithology:	12.000 exhibits
Ictiology:	3.000 exhibits
Entomology:	3.500 exhibits
Malacology:	2.000 exhibits
Teratology:	15 cases
Paleontology:	8.000 specimens
Anthropology:	100 specimens
Mineralogy and Petrology:	4.500 rocks
Lizards:	1.300 samples
Snakes:	2.600 samples
Turtles:	250 samples
Mammals:	1.500 examples.
Serpents: species :	14
holotypes:	2
Lizards: species:	3
Topotypes:	2
Holotypes:	1
Paratypes:	11
Frogs: species:	2
Topotypes:	1
Holotypes:	4
Paratypes:	11
Crabs: Holotypes:	8
Paratypes:	4