

We've got a great museum travelogue of the Americas in store for this edition of

Exhibits Newsline,

so let's get started!

Paul Orselli

Exhibition

100 Years of the Picture Collection: From Abacus to Zoology

Institution

The New York
Public Library

Location

New York City

The Picture Collection at The New York Public Library (NYPL) is the original search engine for images. Remember the times when we relied heavily on other people to help us find what we were looking for? Librarians held all that knowledge in their heads way before Google dared show its face and revolutionize the way we interact with information.

The NYPL keeps a large image collection, organized alphabetically based on subject heading. With such an amazing collection of images, how could the library showcase this without the traditional gallery format? In many inventive ways, actually: an edgy layout, a narrative of the collection's history, and interactive



fig. 1.

Interactive costume flipbook in *100 Years of the Picture Collection: From Abacus to Zoology* at The New York Public Library.

hands-on components that allow proximity without damage.

The aesthetics of this exhibition were definitely working to dispel the myth that libraries are old and stuffy and just full of old books (gasp!). The opening image of the exhibition is a big “A,” black, shiny, and covered in a fun, image-laden introductory text panel. The dark color scheme for the background of the exhibition further helps highlight the artifacts and images. The layout lent itself to random roaming or a more linear progression going clockwise.

The exhibition shows personal items, such as letters and staff documents, to tell the history and evolution of the Picture Collection. It turns out that many famous artists and designers have used it—such as Diego Rivera and Art Spiegelman, among many others. To further illustrate the history and process of the Picture Collection is a video demonstrating where the images come from, how they’re sorted, and how library patrons can use the collection.

Interactive components of the exhibition beyond historical artifacts and images from the collection itself included videos, a hands-on flipbook of costumes, and a costume from a Broadway musical. There are also two corners of the exhibition that showcase just how extensive images are under certain headings. The images were displayed in a vertical, sturdy book so that the “pages” could be moved back and forth, much in the same way that many art museums display art posters in gift shops (fig. 1). After being romanced by the graphics, the objects, and the interactives, I really didn’t think it could get any better. But it did. There were free postcards. On the back of the “Z” at the back of the exhibition that matched the “A” at the beginning were slots holding postcards printed with a variety of images from the collection for visitors to take with them.

—Charissa Ruth, freelance museum educator

fig. 2.

The architectural design by Frank Gehry creates a colorful, eye-catching set of intersecting angles.



LYN WOOD

Museum

Biomuseo

Location

Panama City, Panama

On the final approach into Panama City’s international airport, you can gaze down on fleets of cargo ships anchored in the Pacific, waiting their turn to cross through the Panama Canal. There, at the edge of the canal, is a causeway with a shockingly bright set of colored roofs that make up Frank Gehry’s new building for the recently opened Biomuseo (also known as The Biodiversity Museum: Panama Bridge of Life). This is the first Smithsonian-affiliated museum outside the United States. Once on the ground in Panama, I made my way to this museum, which has been described as a “toucan sitting on the horizon” (fig. 2).

Here, there is a tight relationship between building, exhibition, and story that is uniquely powerful. Much like how geologic processes formed the Isthmus of Panama, you can feel the amazing mash-up of collaboration from a very talented team. I read that while the designer Bruce Mau worked from the inside out on the exhibition, Gehry’s group pushed from

the outside in, resulting in a complex blend of elements. But the star is really the content. Who knew how much the creation of Panama affected our world? Panama became a bridge connecting two continents, allowing species to migrate and creating a barrier between the Pacific and Atlantic that led to the formation of the Gulf Stream. I happily roamed from gallery to gallery learning more about the consequences and significance of the land I was standing on and its impact on the planet’s climate and biodiversity (fig. 3).

I also met with Darién Montanez, who trained as an architect and served as the curator responsible for creating the visitor experience. He explained how closely they worked with the Smithsonian Institution, which has had a research lab in Panama for 100 years, to generate the content. They did not have a collection of objects *per se*, so they created a collection of concepts instead. Darién also explained a rule set down at the very beginning by Bruce Mau—there would be no middle-level information. In other words, the tradition of deploying primary, secondary, and tertiary levels of information was banned. Instead, each gallery represents a single big idea and then provides immediate ways to access and explore interesting details in a variety of formats.

The museum team felt that “attention is a precious commodity,” so they did not want to have visitors laboring to get to the really cool, interesting information. This approach worked so well that I learned more than I ever have in a museum. And, as is too often the case with a content rich museum, I wasn’t even remotely tired after my visit! Ponder this: Panama rising changed our global climate so much that Africa, once a continent of forests, transformed into a savannah environment that caused primates to come out of the trees and become more gregarious to survive. One theory is that this change was key to creating the human species.

Engaging visitors with such big, perspective-shifting concepts in a museum setting is challenging. Biomuseo’s blend of content, environment, and building accomplishes that engagement beautifully.

Learn more at Biomuseo’s website: www.biomuseopanama.org/en.
—Lyn Wood, President, Hands On! Inc.



fig. 3. The dramatic “Worlds Collide” gallery at the Biomuseo presents how a great many species embarked on an unparalleled journey.

Exhibition

Home Ground: Contemporary Art from the Barjeel Art Foundation

Museum

Aga Khan Museum

Location

Toronto, Canada

Located in Toronto, Ontario, the newly established Aga Khan Museum partnered with the Barjeel Art Foundation of the United Arab Emirates to develop an inspiring exhibition featuring 12 Arab artists. The exhibition powerfully addresses the ambiguous political atmosphere of the Middle East and North

Africa through the artist and their pieces.

The contemporary art crosses artistic borders ranging from video narratives by Larissa Sansur, to canvas painting by Abdel Abidin, to original sculpture by Khaled Jarrar. These pieces depict how the political and social stability of the artists’ homes have personally affected them and how they approach their work.

Notwithstanding all of the amazing pieces in the exhibition, one particular series that stood out was Arab-Australian artist Rafaat Ishak’s work entitled “Responses to an Immigration Request from One Hundred and Ninety-Four Governments.” Occupying the large part of the west wall of the space, the piece displays the responses of 194 governments to a general request for immigration. Over a period of two years, Ishak sent the same English-written request to each of these countries asking for legal immigration.

After receiving the responses, he then visually materialized each of them by abstractly painting their flags accompanied by their replies in Arabic.

While adding his personal impact—being an immigrant from Egypt and writing the responses in his own language—Ishak’s piece demonstrates the untold difficulties that immigrants experience.

This exhibition combines its political overtone with the overwhelming originality of the works displayed. I have focused on Ishak’s work as an important example of how the Aga Khan Museum has taken the initiative to address political issues through artists that have actually experienced them, allowing for a creative and educational exchange between the artist, medium, visitors, and institution. Ultimately, the exhibition is a relevant testament of historical and current events occurring in the Middle East and North Africa, which encourages those who experience it to think about the deeper messages behind the art.

More info on the exhibition here: www.agakhanmuseum.org/exhibitions/home-ground-contemporary-art-barjeel-art-foundation. —Anmisa Malvoisin, graduate student, Master of Museum Studies program, University of Toronto

Exhibition

Wildlife Photographer of the Year

Museum

Produced by the Natural History Museum, London

Location

Debuted at the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, Canada

Produced by the Natural History Museum, London, the 51st “Wildlife Photographer of the Year” competition and associated exhibition has made its annual debut at the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) in Toronto, Canada. The exhibition opened on November 21, 2015 and will depart the ROM for the next stop on its tour on March 20, 2016.

Approximately 100 photos that cover 11 categories are installed in customized frames illuminated with LED lights; the black walls and dimmed lighting of the exhibition space allows the photos to truly shine. Each category features a winner and runner-up, and a prize has been awarded to an overall winning photograph, displayed at the end of the exhibition as an exciting climax. The exhibition notably brings visitors’ attention to critical contemporary

issues such as biodiversity, the impact of human activity on animal life, and climate change. Over 40,000 entries were submitted to the competition from around the world, and the selected photographs represent this diversity well—not only in the places where competitors are from, but in the places where the images were taken.

Various age groups are also well represented in the exhibition, with young photographers’ astounding work garnering special attention. Visitors of all abilities are well accommodated, as excellent 3D renderings of some of the photographs allow people, especially those who are blind or have low vision, to engage with the exhibition (fig. 4). Finally, the ROM recently announced that the exhibition has the lowest carbon footprint possible by partnering with Bullfrog Power, a green energy provider, for the exhibition’s power requirements. This exhibition is outstanding in its commitment to educating visitors about not only the beauty, but also the importance of nature by immersing visitors in worlds seldom seen.

—*Madeline Smolarz, graduate student, Master of Museum Studies program, University of Toronto*

Thanks again to all of the contributors for sharing their museum experiences!

If you’d like to contribute to future Exhibits Newline columns, send me an email.

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fig. 4.

Just outside the exhibition highlighting winners of the “Wildlife Photographer of the Year” competition, 3D photographs appear alongside Braille descriptions.