



**NatSCA**

Natural Sciences Collections Association

<http://www.natsca.org>

## Biology Curators Group Newsletter

---

Title: Making an Exhibition of Ourselves at the Natural History Museum, South Kensington

Author(s): Flood, S.

Source: Flood, S. (1977). Making an Exhibition of Ourselves at the Natural History Museum, South Kensington. *Biology Curators Group Newsletter, Vol 1 No 7*, 31 - 32.

URL: <http://www.natsca.org/article/1552>

---

NatSCA supports open access publication as part of its mission is to promote and support natural science collections. NatSCA uses the Creative Commons Attribution License (CCAL) <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.5/> for all works we publish. Under CCAL authors retain ownership of the copyright for their article, but authors allow anyone to download, reuse, reprint, modify, distribute, and/or copy articles in NatSCA publications, so long as the original authors and source are cited.

MAKING AN EXHIBITION OF OURSELVES AT THE NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUM,  
SOUTH KENSINGTON

---

An early review by SF.

Despite the rumours there are specimens in the Human Biology exhibition just opened at the British Museum (Natural History) after all = 6 caterpillars, a dried twig and a spirit preparation of a brain with spinal cord. Admittedly they do look rather self-conscious amidst the high technology of this new exhibition, which occupies the former fish gallery. Oh yes, and there is a potted palm and an (empty) beer tankard. You see how easy it is to dismiss this exhibition in flippant terms. Yet somehow the atmosphere in the gallery, the noise and the expressions on people's faces were something I had never seen in museums before.

I do not intend to review the biological content in detail because clearly a museum biologist is not the target of the exhibition. The only way I could make any judgements at this stage was by watching other people and even in this I am only an amateur; the Public Services Department employs psychologists to mingle with the visitors and assess their reactions. (Perhaps the BCG could run a 'spot the Psychologist' competition?). I could not help wondering what they thought of my progress round the machines, only taking notes when they were unfinished or broken (four more failed as I was going round). However I hope they did have time to notice that perhaps it had been unwise to connect a lever to a bottle of crystals (representing smelling salts) to move it to a model nose to light up a sensory pathway; skilfull eight year olds could scatter the crystals most satisfactorily.

The educational impact of the exhibition is obviously of prime importance whatever the sugaring of the pill by games and films. In fact the design brief contained specific facts or ideas which were to be communicated to visitors, something too rarely done by museums. Some of the spectacular images do communicate.

But in many ways the games communicated better simply because choices had to be made and effort put into the process. Also there is the the beginnings of an attempt at second tier display techniques;

this is mainly characterised by changes in typeface, more complex games or rather repetitive graphic images. There is, too, less of a lead into these areas from curiosity about knowledge than from merely stylistic differences. Or voyeurism. Yes, whisper it not in Kensington, the Natural History Museum has discovered sex. Plastic sex it must be admitted, but nonetheless fully revealed, as it were. Sensitive readers will be relieved to know that the coition model does not move and is even in the 'missionary' position. In fact I was pleased to see that there was a marked absence of schoolboy sniggers, and as this was the introduction to the exhibition that was quite an achievement.

In all events the concept and the novelty appear to have subordinated much of the traditional specimen-based approach without replacing it with sufficiently clear images. I fear the same thing seemed to me to be the fault with the new Norwich Ecology gallery so it will be interesting to see how the B.M. approach the Ecology phase of their display development programme, after the lessons and analyses of the current exhibition. Because, make no mistake, some of it does work very well and is worth continuing (though I hope no provincial museum could afford or would want to copy) and even the disasters show that there are some museum staff willing to take risks rather than forming committees.

#### NOTE

This review was written about one week after the opening of the Exhibition in June (and just before I was to be interviewed for a job with the Exhibition Unit). Now, in November, it could be expected that time and the bitterness of rejection(!) would affect my views. However on a recent visit (with a group of Art/History orientated curators) I could find no reason to alter my original statements - I still have mixed feelings, there are still broken machines and it still is not finished. From discussions with the exhibition staff it is clear that many lessons have been learned about the unreliability of audio-visual aids but informed reaction from museums has not been great. The BCG Newsletter would seem to be an ideal forum for discussing this matter, and I would imagine that, given sufficient provocation by BCG members, some response from the Public Services Department will be forthcoming.