



# NATURE AND TEXTS IN GLASS CASES

*The vitrine as a tool for textualizing nature*

by Brita Brenna

*What can glass cases teach us about how nature is written or read? This article seeks to understand the work done by glass cases in Bergen Museum in Norway around 1900 specifically, and more generally how glass cases was an important tool for making natural history museums into textual media. In this article it is claimed that when we focus on how natural history museums manufacture culturally specific museum nature, it is a legacy of a reform movement that set out to “discipline” museum nature around 1900 in order to make nature legible for “everyman”. An important museum movement by the end of the nineteenth century worked to make natural museums into places where one could learn by reading, not by touching or engaging with the natural objects, qua objects. This insistence on making nature readable, it is claimed, should make us cautious about analysing natural history museums as texts.*

**Keywords:** glass case, natural history museum, museum reform, museum nature

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## Introduction

Natural history museums are institutions that have as their main rationale to make nature visible. They have, however, been analysed as sites for telling stories about nature. As Donna Haraway has shown so forcefully, these are stories imbued with moral and scientific authority. In her analysis of the American Museum of Natural History in New York Haraway insisted that natural history museums are storytellers that offer visitors carefully crafted stories about nature. More precisely she offers us a reading of the institution American Museum of Natural History, of the installation of the world famous dioramas, and of their creator Carl Akeley. She analyses the architecture and the ground plan of the museum, the ornamentation and exhibits, the dioramas and taxidermy, as meaningful signs that can be deciphered to tell a story about a particular crafting of nature. "H.F. Osborn, president of the American Museum from 1908-33, thought Akeley was Africa's biographer. This essay will argue that Akeley is America's biographer, or rather a biographer of a part of North America" (Haraway 1984-85: 21). In Haraway's reading, the museum does not first and foremost tell stories about nature, but about a culture that represents nature in particular ways.

After Haraway and other scholars who have analysed natural history museums, writing about these museums is not so much about writing about nature 'as such', as it is to write cultural histories of ways of representing nature. Nature in natural

history museums has been made visible by these scholars as a very particular form of nature which is thoroughly entangled with culture. According to science historian Sam Alberti, natural history museums do not contain nature, but 'museum nature'; a particular form of nature, made up of "the practices of collecting, preservation, and displaying certain things – animals, plants, fossils and rocks – and the conceptual and exhibitionary frameworks in which they are set" (Alberti 2008: 74).

The analyses of natural history museums as storytelling devices have given us important insights into how these museums work, how they craft particular versions of nature and Western relations to nature. However, the use of narrative and text as concepts for the analysis of these museums also begs the question of how these buildings – filled with stones and bones, furs and skins, glass, iron and stucco – can be reduced to storytelling machines. As I want to show in this article, when we focus on how these museums manufacture culturally specific museum nature, it is a legacy of a reform movement that set out to 'discipline' museum nature around 1900, to make nature legible for 'everyman'. An important museum movement by the end of the nineteenth century worked to make natural museum into places where one could learn by reading, not by touching or engaging with the natural objects, *qua* objects. This insistence on making nature readable, I will claim, should make us cautious about analysing natural history museums as texts.

## Bergen Museum: A glass case case

Inspired first by Donna Haraway and later by the fast-growing group of scholars who study natural history museums, I have explored how 'museum nature' was produced in a local natural history museum in Norway.<sup>1</sup> Established in 1825, Bergen Museum is the oldest museum institution in Norway. Originally it was a universal museum, covering cultural history, archaeology, art and natural history disciplines, and it has had a long and successful history as a research institution. Especially in the latter half of the nineteenth century it was an important site for natural history research in Norway, and my research has focused on this particular period of its history (Brenna 2013, Eriksen 2009).

One of the peculiarities of this museum today is that the Norwegian Directorate for Cultural Heritage has signalled that they want to list the architecture and museum furniture in the monumental stone building which was inaugurated as a museum in 1867. This means, more specifically, that the glass cases, which are the main museum furniture in this building, will be preserved for the future, but it also means that they have acquired a specific status as objects of cultural value. The value of the natural objects that the glass cases were built

to protect has declined; that of the cases themselves has increased. Paradoxically, as the glass cases become heritage, the museum nature inside them is left to be taken care of – by the museum. The cases that were built for the natural objects are now detached from the objects and treated as pieces of architectural heritage.

Why, and for whom, are the glass cases important? What work do the glass cases do in Bergen Museum in the years around 1900? In this article I want to focus on one particular aspect of glass case work: The display of museum nature as a book to be read.

Today, glass cases are universal emblems of 'the museum'. They are signs of museum-ness, of a particular way of making things both visible and out of reach. In museum literature the glass case has often figured as a synecdoche, as a part that stands for the whole (see for example Henning 2006). In a long tradition of museum critique the glass case has been a metaphor for what museums do to objects. Museums, it is claimed, decontextualizes objects, sever their bonds to any original context, and taps them for monetary and use-value.<sup>2</sup> However, these critiques have a tendency to treat

<sup>1</sup> This article is based on my previous work on glass cases in Bergen Museum see Brenna 2013. For histories of natural history museums see in particular Beckman 1999, Thorsen et. al 2013, Yanni 2005.

<sup>2</sup> For decontextualization see de Quincy (2012). For the transformation of value-thesis see for example the influential definition of "a collection" developed by Krystof Pomian (1988:16).



the glass cases as 'black boxes'; self-evident museum features that do not need further investigation.

Looking back at the history of collecting and museums, glass and glass cases were not always the essential tools for display and storage. Historians of museums have shown how the interactions that took place in the museums changed from the eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth century, and I want to claim that glass technologies played a role in this change. "Solely viewing a collection was considered a superficial means of apprehending it," write Constance Classens and David Howes, about early-modern collections (2006:202). Visitors were invited not only to touch and smell, but to listen and talk. A collection could be a place for sociability, and visitors were there together with the caretaker or owner. Classens and Howes situates the transition from a multisensory to a purely visual museum practice in the years from the Enlightenment up to the mid-nineteenth century. This is the period when glass cases came to dominate the museums. However, Tony Bennett has localized the transformation of collections to the nineteenth century when collections increasingly were organized and labelled as texts set up to satisfy the eye. This was a sensory universe "in which the museum visitor is no longer to be engaged in conversation but is rather envisaged as an eye that is both detached from and placed before nature, as a reader before a text" (Bennett 1998:353).

Bennett's interpretation is that this sensory regime was intensified during the nineteenth century, in a constant struggle by the museums to distance themselves from popular forms of entertainment. The result was, however, not that museum invited the public to appreciate nature aesthetically, as pictures, but to stand before nature, as "a reader before a text," as quoted above. The natural history museums were at the forefront of this increased textualization. Perhaps nature threatened to be too unruly and was judged too difficult to decipher for the ordinary visitor? The glass case was a technology for making nature less multifarious, and the message could be controlled by turning nature into illustrations of texts. Might it be so that our willingness to read museums is a legacy of a project that intended to reduce nature to 'nature writing'?

### How to read nature out of glass cases?

On the following pages I will present this change in the meaning and use of museum objects, seen, so to say, through the lens of the glass cases in Bergen. The glass cases are powerful in their

presence in Bergen Museum today, but also when one confronts the museum in old pictures, the physical presence of glass cases is strong. This is the typical impression we get from the pictures from natural history museums around 1900. However, "glass case" is hardly a word that functions as a searchable key in most museum archives. At a first glance, they are almost invisible in the internal notes and local correspondence in the archives of Bergen Museum, but they can be seen in the international correspondence. The local practice of building and producing the cases on site has left few traces. The international trade, on the other hand, can be studied through the letters to glass case producers, their marketing materials, and the reports from visits to the metropolitan natural history museums in Paris and London. Glass cases were international commodities, and museum technologies were international.

One important resource for researching the insistent but inert glass cases has been methods and concepts from Science and Technology Studies. The concept of the 'black box', as it has been defined by Bruno Latour, can be used to investigate the means through which glass cases have become such self-evident features in museums (see Latour 1987). One of the tenets in actor-network theory has been to inquire how facts are fabricated, and to follow the trails of how something is made into established knowledge. These rules of method gave me good reasons to start my studies by opening up the paradoxically well lit and transparent black boxes in Bergen Museum. A black box stands for and condenses a complex network. The smooth and transparent vitrines can be viewed as such complex ensembles that incorporate the work and the agency of a long range of different actors. Glass cases, as all black boxes, are difficult to decipher by merely looking. Made to be looked through, transparency is precisely their point. To understand the way vitrines work, it seems necessary to study how they came into being and to search for the different actors that have made them come into being. We need to make visible the networks and actors that make them stable.

One way to open the glass cases as black boxes is to follow the traces of the international networks that were at work in the museums around 1900. The glass cases in Bergen Museum can be studied as a complex ensemble of actors – some of whom acted at a long distance – and the trails can be followed to the furniture making, journals, and correspondence in other museums.

## Dividing the museum, dividing nature

Glass can be seen as an important agent for the making of the public museum in the nineteenth century. New production methods and increasingly cheaper and larger glass plates helped museums become places where a large public in anonymous crowds could experience contact with natural objects.<sup>3</sup> With the help of glass,

the objects could be locked up, safe from dirt, dust and the touch of visitors, who could thus move around the museum without constant supervision. Glass could be given the duty to organize the geography of the museum, to allow some bodies to access some spaces, and to prevent others. The most succinct example

<sup>3</sup> For the history of glass in the nineteenth century, see Armstrong 2008.



of this comes from Thomas Huxley's 1868 design for a museum in Manchester (see Yanni 2005). His plan was ingenious in its use of glass as a physical boundary and marker of who was allowed to be where. One part of the museum was intended for the public, who could study the natural objects behind glass from their position in the public division of the museum. Behind these glass panes, the animals could be situated in safe distance from the public. So could the curators. In the curator's division, scientists and students could approach the stuffed animals and other natural objects freely. While the curator could move around at the backstage, able to handle and physically engage with the natural objects, the visitor could only look. Huxley's plan was not adopted in its full consequences in museum design in his own time. However, his plan to make only a small part of the collection visible to the public while the scientist could have access to the whole, was gradually realized in museums around the world (see Kretschmann 2006 for the importance of this reform in Germany).

This ideal of the divided museum, where the public and the curators were separated and had unequal access to the displayed objects, was important for Bergen Museum from the 1890s. In 1890, the curator of the botany department, later the secretary and in the end director of the museum, Jørgen Brunchorst, went on a study trip to Britain and France. He was deeply impressed by his visit to the newly finished natural museum in South Kensington. Two years later he proposed to rearrange the natural history department in the museum according to the new standards set in London.

Brunchorst had a special admiration for the glass cases in South Kensington; "they are quite elegant, but also very expensive, as mahogany, glass and wrought iron are the predominant materials used for desks, as well as for free-standing glass cases and wall-cabinets" (Brunchorst 1891:XV). These luxury items would be impossible to import to Bergen. The organization was more adaptable: the choreography of visitors, the curators, and the objects on exhibit. Brunchorst was inspired by the collections' systematic displays, separate departments for research, instructive and detailed labels, and the illustrations in the form of maps and drawings. In all the departments that caught his attention there had been "great emphasis on communication of knowledge to the visiting public; with an emphasis on forcing the visitors not simply to satisfy their curiosity, but really to learn something." This was even more so, he claimed, in the case of the 'introductory collection' in the hall of the museum: "... this collection is an elaborate and comprehensive text book in 'general zoology' and 'general botany'." (Brunchorst 1891:XIX). He described this as a text book paraphrased onto labels which meticulously described every specific object. The labels explained the

specimens, and the specimens served as illustrations for the labels, as Brunchorst described it. "After a thorough examination of one of these glass cases one has been taught many hours worth of zoology within less than half an hour," he exclaimed (Brunchorst 1891:XX).

The emphasis was on learning. Learning could be achieved by making a radical break in the institution – between the part devoted to science, and the part devoted to instruction of 'everyman'. Throughout the yearbook entry, Brunchorst stressed that the objects needed to be instructive for visitors and accessible for scientists. Following upon this, in 1891 Brunchorst presented, in a draft to his peers, a plan for the reorganization of the natural history department of Bergen Museum.<sup>4</sup> Now some objects would be 'textbook material', others the basis for research.

Brunchorst had listened carefully to leading international voices, not least the director of the natural history department of the British Museum, William Henry Flower. In an 1889 address, Flower told the British Association for the Advancement of Science that "I believe that the main cause of what may be fairly termed the failure of the majority of museums – especially museums of natural history – to perform the functions that might be legitimately expected of them is that they nearly always confound together the two distinct objects which they may fulfill [research and instruction], and by attempting to combine both in the same exhibition practically accomplish neither." (Flower 1998:15) For Flower, putting a complete collection on display was as absurd as framing and hanging onto the walls all the book pages of the British Library. Hence he called for a strict separation between public and scientific collections. Or put in our terms – the collection was no longer a collection; it should be divided into an exhibition for the public and a study collection for the scientist.

The most pertinent points of Flower's argument concern the status and being of the natural objects in these two different realms. The research collection should allow for careful investigations of the objects, and the objects should be treated as books in a library, as references. In the public gallery, the number of the objects should be limited, "according to the nature of the subject to be illustrated and the space available." (Flower 1998:17) The exhibition object in the glass case was an illustration. As with Brunchorst, we see how natural objects acquired differentiated meanings: For the researcher the object was to be investigated, touched and smelled and handled. For the visitor, the object was to be seen at a safe distance, properly explained. The glass case would be the technology for disseminating the knowledge gained by touching and handling to the uneducated public. It should serve like an illustrated book

<sup>4</sup> Bergen Museum Naturhistorisk avd. VIII D a 3, Brev 1891-1893, Statsarkivet in Bergen.

<sup>5</sup> The principle points to be aimed at in the research collection was, Flower stated, "the preservation of the objects from all influences deleterious to them, especially dust, light, and damp; their absolutely correct identification, and record of every circumstance that need be known of their history; their classification and storage in such a manner that each one can be found without difficulty or loss of time; and, both on account of expense as well as convenience of access, they should be made to occupy as small a space as is compatible with these requirements." (Flower 1898:16).



where the text carried the intended meaning that the objects illustrated. "Above all," wrote Flower, "the purpose for which each specimen is exhibited, and the main lesson to be derived from it, must be distinctly indicated by the labels affixed, both as headings of the various divisions of the series, and to the individual specimens. A well-arranged educational museum has been defined as a collection of instructive labels illustrated by well-selected specimens." (Flower 1998:18) Here Flower cites the powerful and influential museum spokesperson and Assistant Secretary to the United States National Museum, George Browne Goode, who was particularly keen on labeling objects, but also on stressing the pedagogic potential of object-lessons (see Annual Report 1980, Bennett 1995 and 1999). Flower and Goode were museum reformers whose writings and practical museum work reached a large audience of museum professionals.

Brunchorst in Bergen approached The Smithsonian in Washington, after having read a report in their yearbook on glass cases, written by precisely George Brown Goode. Brunchorst's means of being abreast with the development of museum organisation and technologies were, as we have seen, travels to museums where the museum Flower directed became a model of emulation. Other means at hand in a province in Norway was to read museum reports and journals, and to correspond. Together with Flower, Goode came to epitomize the new museum politics and pedagogy in the last decades of the nineteenth century. For Brunchorst Goode's writings were not least important because he explained how glass cases should be built, how they should be installed and how they should be furnished to serve as instructors for the public.

For Goode, museum cases were active educators, and education was promoted as one of the main ambitions of a well-organized museum. The new museum building that opened up in Bergen in 1898 had two lecture halls, in addition to the large amount of glass cases. And glass cases were important tools for good museum education, as Goode stated it: "Each well-arranged case with its display of specimens and labels is a perpetual lecturer, and the

thousands of such constantly on duty in every large museum have their effect upon a much larger number of minds than the individual efforts of the scientific staff, no matter how industrious with their pens or in the lecture room" (Goode 1893:23). To fulfill this duty, the cases would have to be of glass, "the very best of glass in the largest possible sizes" (Goode 1893:23). There should be as little wood as possible and even the top – no matter what its size – should be of glass. Maximum glass would enable light to fall upon the objects in the largest possible degree.

The theory which had led to the development of the cases that Goode presented in the accompanying drawings was based on reading objects as texts: The manner of reading the case should be from left to right, and each panel should stand for itself, "like the page of a book". What is surprising is that Goode, who has become famous for his object-based approach to learning, relied so heavily on a textual approach to museum display. But he relied, as did Flower and Brunchorst, on the idea that education, which was the museum's fundamental idea for them, needed words for transmission, and that in the public museum, the objects functioned as mere illustrations of the knowledge that one could obtain from the written word. Thus, visible objects and translucent cases were important for making the public read. Museum labels would be the companion to better museum cases. "The art of label writing is in its infancy," wrote Goode, "and there are doubtless possibilities of educational results through the agency of labels and specimens which are not as yet at all understood." (Goode 1893:37).

In Bergen Museum, we can follow staff making new labels in the various parts of the museum, year by year, under Brunchorst's administration. What exact labels that were produced at this time is hard to ascertain, the point is that the work of first furnishing the building with good glass cases, and thereafter presenting the objects for the public with the appropriate labelling, was considered a task worthy of mentioning in the yearly reports of the natural history department of the museum; Goode's message had been received and the curators in Bergen were actively taking part in writing nature.

## Conclusion: Glass cases as epistemological technologies

This nature came, as shown, in different forms. The glass case wrote nature with pedagogic letters, nature would be interpreted by the curators and presented to the public as an illustration accompanying a text. It is discernible how museum objects underwent a transformation in this period: from unique specimens to illustrations. But at the back of the museum, in the research collection, nature could exist in more variety, in larger series, and in many versions. There natural objects were research objects, and they were important as objects. Popular nature and scientific nature were thus divided. As we have seen, glass cases helped pave the way for the public museum as we know it, a place where a large anonymous crowd could gather in front of objects which could be seen without intervention. As museum reformers realized that objects needed

interpretation to be correctly read by a larger audience, they relied on texts in the form of labels, and the objects became illustrations of the texts. The glass cases became text-books.

I started by voicing skepticism about relying on textual metaphors when analyzing museum nature, because the exhibitions in natural history museums were crafted to be read. Nobody has claimed that one should abstain from analyzing Italian renaissance paintings symbolically because they are made according to elaborate symbolical schemata. However, one could claim that there are more to the paintings than symbols, as I would claim that there are more to natural history museums than texts. Donna Haraway has stressed the material-semiotic character of, among other things, the



taxidermied animals in museums (Haraway 1984-85). Her reading of the American Museum of Natural History involves more than reading it as text. She insists on the material and semiotic presence of the natural objects. This is also a way to read glass cases and I will claim, the work glass cases do: They are material-semiotic actors, and surprisingly they were actors that took part in textualizing nature in the late nineteenth century. My claim then, is that it is important to look at the material presence of glass cases to be able to see how they became important as textualizing technologies.

Labels and other texts are perhaps more obvious candidates to do research on when looking for how nature is textualized in natural history museums. So why the glass case? The glass case story from Bergen Museum presents reading as the privileged mode to present nature to a larger public in museums in this period and in

this the glass case served as an important actor. Both of these facts are surprising, and at odds with an understanding of museums as sites where one is confronted with the real material object. Today, glass cases are used to produce aesthetic effects as much as scientific facts. Glass cases are made use of to make the objects visible as material entities. In many instances they deliberately seem to produce cultural value rather than natural facts. Maybe this is the best answer to the question of why the Bergen glass cases are listed and not the natural objects that they protect: They have become visible as technologies that produce cultural value.

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