ville de lille

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THE MUSEUM'S MUST-SEES!

Visiting guide

MHN musée d'histoire naturelle de lille

This guide is to be read on-site and offers you to discover the natural history museum of Lille. All you have to do is to locate the must-sees on the plan, to go to the indicated location and be guided.

The museum's remarkable interior architecture is characteristic of museums from the end of the 19th century. This building, designed by Alfred Mongy, was given up in 1895 to receive the Faculty of Sciences of Lille and the collections of the natural history museum, which was inaugurated in 1822.

THE MUSEUM HAS 4 COLLECTIONS THAT GATHER MORE THAN 450.000 OBJECTS.

ZOOLOGY: STUFFED BIRDS AND MAMMALS, SKELETONS, SHELLFISH AND INSECTS...

GEOLOGY: FOSSILS, ROCKS AND MINERALS...

EXTRA-EUROPEAN ETHNOGRAPHY: EVERYDAY LIFE OBJECTS, WORSHIP OBJECTS, JEWELLERY, COSTUMES, WEAPONS...

SCIENCES AND TECHNIQUES: SAMPLES OF MATERIALS, INDUSTRIAL MODELS, PICTURES, SCIENTIFIC INSTRUMENTS, TEXTILES...

Today, 4.500 objects from the zoology and the geology collections are to be seen in the permanent areas, that is to say 1% of the four collections. The temporary exhibitions allow taking out other objects from the reserve collection and to sharing them with the visitors. Because they are of excellent quality, the museum's collections are often loaned for exhibitions or studies to French but also foreign institutions.

Recently, the Museum began its transformation with: a new entrance rue Gosselet, the amphitheatre Charlotte Ruderman-Dehorne or else a shop and café...

From 2023, the second phase of renovation works is planned on the entire building to expand the exhibition areas, which will allow the exhibition of objects from the four collections that have never been showed.

The mural paintings of the former Faculty of Sciences

Five imposing paintings embellish these huge stairs, but only two of them are visible for the moment. They are geographical maps of the region and a part of Belgium. They have been made at the beginning of the 20th century, back when the building was the premises of the Lille Institute of Natural Sciences belonging to the Faculty of Sciences. They were a unique educational medium for Earth sciences researchers and students.

HOW TO READ THESE MAPS?

Each colour represents a geological period which includes rocks and fossils that are specific to that period. For example, on the map Massif de l'Ardenne, which is located on the ground floor, we can observe a dark green colour: as indicated in the legend, it corresponds to the Westphalian era (the upper Carboniferous, about 300 million years ago). It locates with precision the coal mining area in Belgium.

On the landing can be found the very first geographical map which represents the mining region of the Nord and the Pas-de-Calais.

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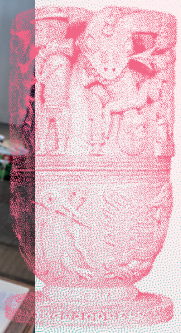
The cabinet of curiosities

In the past, "cabinet of curiosities" were private collections possessed by kings and nobles, in which were exhibited strange objects and unknown animals, brought from distant countries by explorers.

This area pays tribute to this custom, which was very common in the 18th century. It gives a glimpse of the diversity and the richness of the preserved pieces while exhibiting objects from the ethnography collection, which is, for the moment, not very represented in the permanent areas. Indeed, the specimens displayed in the museum are mostly from the geology and the zoology collections.

Discover in this cabinet of curiosities some of the tests and instruments from the astonishing collection 'Human's Measure' preserved in the museum, which comes from the collection Sciences and Techniques.



KEEP AN EYE OUT!

Try to find, on this table, several objects: the skull of an exotic boar, a harmonic analyser, a volcanic rock and a Tibetan musical instrument.

The sperm whale

All the skeletons hanging down the ceiling beams belong to marine mammals: a sperm whale, a minke whale, a walrus, a harbour porpoise, a pilot whale, ...

Additional information about these species can be found while going upstairs to the passageway. These animals cannot be stuffed (large size, bare skin, a thick layer of fat...), that is why only the skeletons are exhibited, with a reduced size resin reconstruction near the information.

This sperm whale is more than 13 meters long: it ran aground in Denmark in 1996 and arrived in the museum in 2001. It is the biggest (complete) skeleton of the museum!

DID YOU KNOW?

The two small bones hanging down the spinal column of the sperm whale witness the past evolution of the cetaceans. Indeed, it is a vestigial structure that corresponds to the pelvis of their quadrupedal terrestrial ancestors, which were attached to the animal's back legs.

The wolves

The wolf, which had completely disappeared in France, is back: through the Alps, it has now settled in the massif des Vosges. Why not in the Nord or the Pas-de-Calais?

Behind the glass of the wolves' showcase, you can see an old specimen dating back to 1830. It allows observing the evolution of the taxidermy technique: its frozen posture contrasts with those of the two other specimens which are more recent.

Besides its age, its origin is remarkable: it comes from Montreuil-sur-Mer (62, north of France) and then attests to the presence of the wolf in the region 200 years ago! Other big European mammals can be seen in this area of the museum: lynx, brown bear, chamois, roebuck, boar...

The taxidermy

WHERE DO THE ANIMALS COME FROM?

Most of the stuffed animals preserved by the museum date back to the 19th century. They come from private collectors' collections, from purchases made from naturalist societies, or itinerant menageries.

The collections keep on expanding nowadays, thanks to donations from zoological parks.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO TAXIDERMY ANIMALS?

In the beginning, scientists preserved animals to study them and to make an inventory of living beings. Today, the collections constitute a heritage witness of the biodiversity evolution.

To stuff a mammal, the taxidermist makes a model from wood, metal rods, then sculpts polyurethane foam in the shape of the body before placing the skin on it.

Before that, wood fibres were used, it resembled straw, hence the "straw stuffing".

To stuff a bird, some parts of the skeleton are kept (wings, feet, skull) and the volume of the body is reconstituted with wood fibre.

WHAT IS REAL?

The hair, the fur, the horns, the hooves, the feathers, the beaks, the teeth (if the skull is included in the model), ...

WHAT IS ARTIFICIAL?

The eyes (made out of glass), the tongue (made out of resin), the colour of certain parts of the body (paint, varnish), the teeth (moulded in resin), ...

Thomas Lo Presti / DICOM - Ville de Lille

The birds' room

This room, which displays European birds, has been barely changed since its installation in 1908. It witnesses the accumulation of the specimens, which filled all the rooms of the former museum.

It is similar to the 19th-century classification which gathered the species by similarities: diurnal and nocturnal birds of prey, gallinaceans, passerines, waders, palmipeds, ...

IS IT POSSIBLE TO SEE A GOLDEN EAGLE IN THIS ROOM?

Yes, but you'll find it under the name "aigle fauve" (instead of "aigle royal")!

Indeed, the common names can change from one country to another, from one region to another, or even evolve through time. For specialists, the point of reference is the scientific name (usually in Latin).

The polar bear

A POLAR BEAR "STUFFED WITH STRAW"?

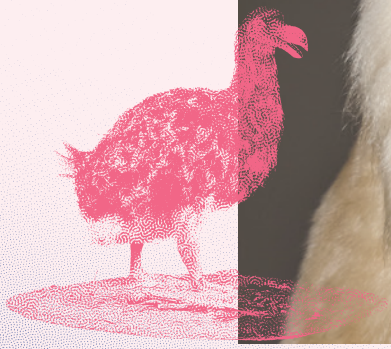
The polar bear is the representative animal of the endangered species, many of which are nowadays protected. One of the museum's roles is to sensitise the visitors to the threats to biodiversity.

The exceptional acquisition of this bear by the museum has been possible thanks to the hunting quotas to which the Inuit populations are entitled to for their survival.

© Stéphane Lancel / MHN

DID YOU KNOW?

The museum also possesses specimens of extinct species, therefore preserving a precious vestige of their past existence for future generations. In the main gallery, you can find the popular dodo, the symbol of the extinct species. It is a reconstruction because there is no existing stuffed dodo in the world.



The large glass wall

This large glass wall had been renovated in 2015, thanks to generous donators, to be what it was like at the beginning of the 20th century, when it was first installed.

Old specimens that have been renovated are mixed with recent ones, certain of which have been spectacularly preserved thanks to a remarkable taxidermy technique like the sloth, the orangutans, the clouded leopard or the sloth bear.

The preservation is an essential mission for the museum: the numerous campaigns of restoration for the specimens allow preserving this precious heritage.

DID YOU KNOW?

This kind of scenography is inspired by dioramas: in the museums; dioramas present the animals in their natural environment, which is whether reconstituted or painted on a fresco in the background. By making the choice of displaying next to each other in this décor (rocks made out of concrete) animals that do not coexist in nature, this large glass wall allows displaying about thirty mammal species! It contrasts with the rest of the room, in which the museography is more recent, less loaded, and proposes to understand what defines a mammal.

The anthill

DO ANTS EAT THE LEAVES?

These leafcutter ants cut the leaves to make the mushroom grow (the mushroom is in the red box). As for the ants, they feed on the secretion produced by the mushroom.

WHY ARE LIVING BEINGS IN A MUSEUM?

Insectariums are the joy of the children who enjoy searching the insects in the vegetation.

Those presentations also have a didactic interest: indeed, some of these species allow observing several forms of mimicry, which can be surprising sometimes (leaf insects, orchid mantis, ...).

BY COMING TO THE MUSEUM, YOU WILL SHIVER AT THE SIGHT OF A TARANTULA!

All of these animals are born and raised in the nursery within the museum laboratory.

MHN / Ville de Lille

The iguanodon

This herbivore dinosaur lived in the region 130 million years ago. Beside a recent life-size reconstruction, we can observe an older one, reconstructed in reduced size.

They illustrate the evolution of scientific knowledge and the difficulties that might encounter palaeontologists.

The smaller reconstruction represents a four-legged iguanodon with a horn on its forehead. This pointed element has been identified as a thumb, thanks to the discovery of complete skeletons in Bernissart (Belgium) in 1878.

The life-size iguanodon is standing, rose on its back legs to feed, which gives it a completely different look. And its thumb is at the right place!

A MEGALOSAURUS FACES IT!

They both lived in the region, but not in the same era. This carnivorous dinosaur is much smaller and older than the popular tyrannosaurus, that lived on the American continent.

The Carboniferous fossils

The Lille natural history museum preserves a large collection of palaeobotany that comes from the mining area.

Those fossils allowed us to reconstitute our regional landscape at the Carboniferous era (a geological period which means 'carbon-bearing'): 300 million years ago, gargantuan forests were growing in the region!

HOW DO WE KNOW?

Thanks to the plant fossils found in between the layers of coal during the mining operation that happened in the region at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. By comparing these fossils to the contemporary vegetal species, we have been able to determine that the Carboniferous plants could grow 30 or 40 metres high under a tropical climate and that our region was, at the time, located near the equator.

WHICH FAUNA LIVED THERE?

Millions of years before the dinosaurs appear on Earth, very big arthropods lived there (insects, arachnids, scorpions, ...).

The most popular were called Meganeura (a gigantic dragonfly) and Arthropleura (a kind of enormous millipede): they are life-size reconstituted (they can be observed while going up the passageway)!

The teratology

This word means the "science of monsters"
(from the Greek "teratos", which means "monster").

From the 19th century, scientists begin to classify malformations according to their look or position and lead experiments to discover their origins. This study field then finds its place within museums' collections.

These observations allowed a better understanding of the mechanisms of an organism's development and prepared the way to modern embryology.

HOW IS THAT POSSIBLE?

Every living being possesses genes that define it: modifications can create anomalies in a living being. Look at the two-bodied calf in this showcase: they are twins that have not successfully separated. The development can also be disrupted by external factors.

IS IT POSSIBLE TO SEE SUCH ANIMALS IN THE WILD?

Even if the examples come mostly from domesticated animals and human beings, a lot of malformations are observed in the animal kingdom.

© EN ATTENTE - Vitrine en montage

The mummies

These mummies come from Thebes ruins in Egypt and were brought back in the collections in 1822.

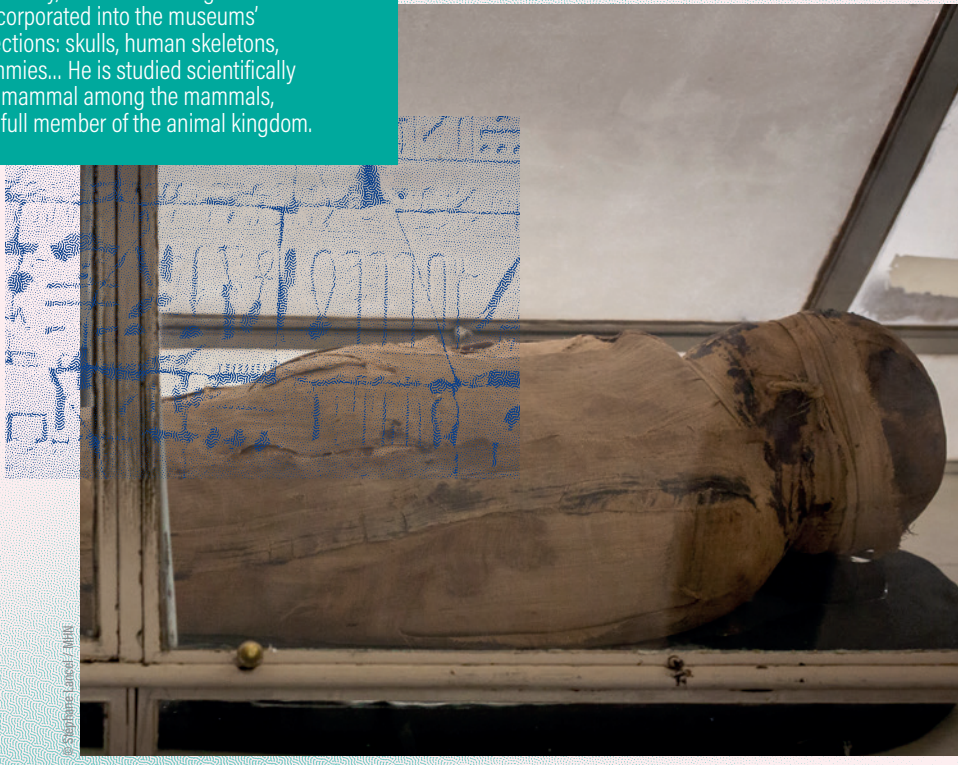
The unbanded mummy has a perfect state of preservation: it is an adult man. The second, surrounded by strips and a shroud, is an adolescent.

Recently, advanced medical imaging analyses have been effectuated on those 2300-year-old mummies. The objective? Reconstruct their structure in volume thanks to three-dimensional scanners to study them better (age, lifestyle, health condition…).

There were doubts about the presence of an animal in the crocodile mummy: we do know now that there is a skeleton inside, but it lacks the skull and a leg…!

WHY ARE MUMMIES IN A NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUM?

Historically, the human being is incorporated into the museums' collections: skulls, human skeletons, mummies... He is studied scientifically as a mammal among the mammals, as a full member of the animal kingdom.



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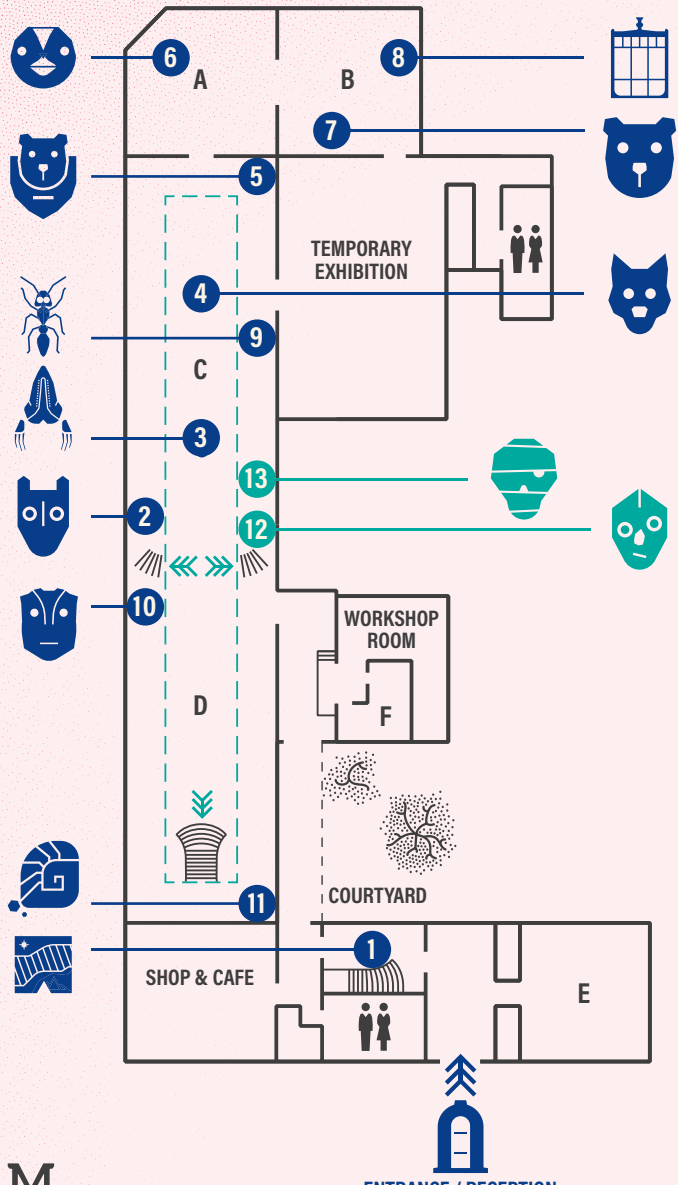

THE ZOOLOGY COLLECTION:

- **A** THE BIRDS' ROOM
- **B** THE MAMMALS' ROOM
- **C** VIVARIUM
- **D** THE GEOLOGY COLLECTION
- **E** THE AMPHITHEATRE CHARLOTTE RUDERMAN-DEHORNE
- **F** CLOAKROOM
- MEZZANINE ACCESS
- 1 THE MURAL PAINTINGS
- 2 THE CABINET OF CURIOSITIES
- 3 THE SPERM WHALE
- 4 THE WOLVES
- 5 THE TAXIDERMY
- 6 THE BIRDS' ROOM
- 7 THE POLAR BEAR
- 8 THE LARGE GLASS WALL
- 9 THE ANTHILL
- 10 THE IGUANODON
- 11 THE CARBONIFEROUS FOSSILS
- 12 THE TERATOLOGY
- 13 THE MUMMIES

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