

## THE ROYAL MUSEUM OF SCOTLAND

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*O autor pretende neste artigo dar a conhecer o Royal Museum of Scotland, Edimburgo. Assim, apresenta brevemente o edifício que acolhe as várias colecções que o integram. De seguida, recordando uma visita recentemente realizada, descreve o museu e as colecções expostas, guiando o leitor através das várias salas. Ao longo desta "vista virtual" é chamada a tenção do leitor para os aspectos que pereceram mais significativos e dignos de referência.*

*In this paper the author presents the Royal Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh. The first topic is the description of the building where the museum is installed. Then, the museum and its collections on display are described, room after room, as the author recollects a recent visit. During this "virtual visit" some particularly relevant aspects are discussed.*

In this second issue of *ANTROPOlógicas* under the topic "presentation of a museum", I will take a look into The Royal Museum of Scotland. It is a widely known museum, publicised in all Edinburgh tourist guide. Except for Edinburgh inhabitants the first contact one can have with the Museum is, in fact, through these tourist guides or, more recently, "surfing" the *Net*. Let us take a quick glance over these sources of information:

The tourist guide presents the Museum as "*Scotland's top museum*"<sup>1</sup>; it gives the address and shows an attractive photograph of the Main Hall. Information on the *Web*<sup>2</sup> are more generous: the Museum is identified as belonging to the National Museums of Scotland, a "*service of international standing*" which includes eight different museums. The

site referring to the Royal Museum of Scotland includes information on the building, the Galleries and Displays, Opening Hours, Admission and Facilities.

I visited the Museum a Sunday afternoon. Waiting by the door, as the museum was not yet opened to the public, were some tourists and some locals with children. Young teenagers forming noisy groups were there too. Admission is free.

The first contact with the museum is the spectacular Main Hall. The iron and glass ceiling provides abundant natural light over a vast space where visitors can see several fish ponds and fountains. Children spend their first minutes in the Museum admiring the big red and black fishes.

Visitors are provided with a leaflet, which includes a floorplan, at the enquiries desk, in the Main Hall. The possibilities of choice are

<sup>1</sup> *Edinburgh City, Coast & and Countryside '97*, Edinburgh & Lothians Tourist Board, Edinburgh, 1997.

<sup>2</sup> See the site <http://www.rms.ac.uk>; it gives access to the Royal Museum of Scotland page

considerable: one can choose to begin by one of the three floors of the Museum. The Galleries contain exhibits on Art, Geology, Natural History, Science and Scientific Instruments and Industry. No specific path is indicated, neither in the building nor on the floorplan. Visitors must decide what to see first and then choose a convenient route to visit the galleries they are interested in. This is probably the result of the main characteristic of this Museum: a large variety of exhibits covering very different themes.

One of the biggest collections on display is the Natural History one. An introduction to this collection is performed in a "sphere" into which visitors can walk, where an audio-visual presentation on life, reproduction and ecology occurs. In the galleries lots of skeletons and stuffed animals evidence the diversity of life forms; from the huge wale to the tiny butterfly, when wandering across various galleries, one can observe a panoply of different zoological specimens. Specially on what concerns this part of the Museum, specimens are out of their ecological context kept in glass cages, even when similar kinds of life forms are put together. In some parts of the exhibit the old fashioned display technique is obvious. In many cases appropriate labels are missing: the lack of information is evident when adults do not find it to answer children's questions. It is possible to see the mammals room from a balcony, one level above the ground, specially to have a closer look at the wale's skeleton (the skeleton is suspended halfway from the ceiling): the dust accumulated over the cages, seen from above, is also worth a mention.

On the other hand, galleries on Geology and Earth evolution were recently renovated and

include interesting display solutions. The formation of our planet and the characteristics of minerals and rocks have an important role in this gallery; changes on Earth's geology and climate are related to ecological transformations; the evolution of mankind has also a place, and it is presented in relation with the changes in the planet's climate.

As I visited the Museum I noticed that many children were coming in, with their parents. One could see that just a few were tourists and that some of the families were visiting the museum for, at least, the second time. Adults were not very interested in the exhibits, but children knew exactly what they wanted to see and organised the tour according to their wishes: animals and skeletons appear to be the favourite and many young voices were claiming for adults' attention and explanations. The exhibits of insects and of very small animals are divided into several different glass cages, in dark rooms; to see a chosen section of the display one must press a button to turn on its light. Some of these devices were not functioning as they should, a fact that did not seem to affect children's interest in this part of the gallery.

Despite being one of the most modern, the Geology and Earth Evolution gallery caused less impression on children. As an adult I would consider this part of the museum much more interesting and well developed than the rest; photographs and schemes, labels and models, everything is thought to match together. Naturally some of the solutions are questionable, but, in general, this exhibit is far more like what a modern museum is expected to be. Children do not seem to think this way; for them, as far as I could observe, real things

are more important than display techniques and real animals, even if they are not alive, are more appealing than theories on Earth formation and evolution.

Another gallery, which is dedicated to scientific instruments, could in my opinion be improved. The objects belonging to this section are, no doubt, interesting; but one might like to have some opportunity to put the *hands on*... some replicas, once the real objects are not resistant enough to be handled. Children come out of this gallery expressing a strong feeling of frustration.

Art and History galleries "mix" with other galleries of the museum. It is difficult to find a chronological or geographical organisation in these galleries and, therefore, the visitor can easily get puzzled. The geology, minerals and history of the Earth gallery is the only one that is almost detached. All others have, in some way, links with very different themes and chronologies. One can abruptly go from Western Decorative Art (1850-2000) to the Ancient Egypt (first floor) or from Invertebrates to Textiles, Dress and Ornaments... and from there to Rocks and Minerals (second floor)!

A final word is due to the Museum facilities: a complete access, including toilets, is prepared for disabled visitors which represents an important improvement in a building that was not originally adapted to this demand. The tea room is conveniently located and is quite attractive; despite not being a large one the shop offers a regular variety of books and souvenirs. The library and the education centre only open by appointment or for scheduled events (according to the leaflet that includes the floorplan).

I left the Museum with this sensation of "lots and lots of things but very few ideas"... In other words, the Museum has important collections, an interesting building, convenient facilities, but a terrible lack of modern and adequate display techniques. The Museum, as a whole, looks like an encyclopaedia with some of the pages mixed up by a humorous editor...