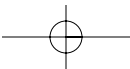
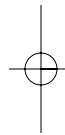
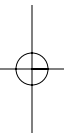


*From Private
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MARCO BERETTA

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Preface

The idea that the emergence of Natural History as an independent discipline was closely connected to the possession and domination of nature, rather than its contemplation, has greatly determined its chronological placement; thus its maximum development is considered to have occurred in the period ranging from the Renaissance to the end of the 18th century. This historiographic interpretation stems from a teleological reconstruction aimed at justifying the historical importance of Natural History, starting from the presupposition that it gave birth to a philosophical vision of nature, entirely Baconian, where Man plays the role of law-giver and master. Once that idea was established, the numerous references to naturalistic collecting scattered throughout ancient and medieval sources were considered too fragmentary to justify modifying the chronology, and thus the entire historiographic framework, of this reconstruction.

Another consequence of this approach, which is not without its negative aspects, is the privileged attention given to general philosophical positions, while the material sources of the study of nature are often neglected or disregarded entirely. The famous controversy between Buffon and Linnaeus, to mention only one example from the abundant literature on the subject, was almost never considered as representing two different ways of collecting and organizing specimens (which for the most part still exist) in their respective botanical gardens and museums, but is perceived exclusively as a literary controversy between two opposing speculative systems. However, the natural history works of these two naturalists deal with general theoretical principles only in their introductory sections, so limiting ourselves to a textual analysis of these fragments can only lead to partial and in some cases misleading results.

If we begin to examine the objects and collections more closely, we discover, for example, that Buffon had little difficulty accepting that Jean André Thouin, his assistant at the Jardin du Roi, organized plants according to Linnaeus's classification method, thus adopting in practice what had been emphatically rejected in theory. These contradictions were particularly frequent in natural history due to the ever-increasing number of new species to organize and classify. The explosion in

the number of species identified since the Renaissance could not be managed solely by the intellectual exercise of refining classification methods. It also required familiarity with exceedingly varied and complex procedures to prepare specimens for their proper conservation and ensure them appropriate places in the museum or botanical garden.

Much more so than in other sciences, the role of writing in natural history is relatively secondary to the naturalist's techniques of handling and preserving specimens, by the care taken when organizing the species in a collection, and by the ways in which the exhibit is displayed to the public. For the rest, as in the case of the Linnaeus-Buffon controversy, collections and specimens tell stories that do not always agree with the texts serving as their framework and introduction.

Naturally, the objects tell a material story that can be difficult to decipher, and the interweaving of scientific motivation, personal interests, and external influences that lead to the formation of collections of natural specimens is extremely complex. Also, since the time of its Aldrovandian definition during the second half of the 16th century, natural history was affected by methods of classifying and collecting objects that were often completely contradictory. The Aldrovandian idea of recreating a microcosmos of nature in the museum by collecting and organizing objects from the mineral, plant and animal kingdoms never became a common standard; the opinions of the Bologna naturalist in that regard were never as precise as one might expect from a pioneer of a scientific discipline.

Therefore, abandoning for a moment the study of texts, and examining more thoroughly the relationship between naturalists and their natural history specimens, as well as the methods employed for organizing them, we see that a specimen's particular identity considerably determined the ways naturalists related themselves to it, inspiring diverse considerations regarding its correct placement in the appropriate spaces and influencing the early emergence of various disciplines such as botany and mineralogy. In other words, each specimen is not merely a neutral object but offers precious clues for understanding the events surrounding the birth of natural history museums and the development of the scientific disciplines that grew up around them.

This volume assembles the papers presented at a conference sponsored by the European Science Foundation in Ravenna on June 19 and 20, 2004. The second stage in the ESF conference network devoted to *New Perspectives in the Enhancement of the European Scientific Heritage*, the conference *From Private to Public* aimed to call attention to the different ways naturalists have utilized collections and the spaces that house them. The articles presented for this project offer much food for thought on topics relating to the material history of natural history collecting.

The conference was promoted by the Faculty of Cultural Heritage at the University of Bologna, and I wish to thank the Dean, Antonio Panaino, for his active support, which ensured its great success. Heartfelt thanks also go to Raffaella Simili, director of the Interdepartmental Center for History and Epistemology

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“Federigo Enriques,” for her support during the preparation of the conference and publication of its Proceedings.

The conference was organized with the valuable collaboration of the Fondazione Flaminia of Ravenna, and I especially wish to thank its director Andrea Bassi and Carla Rossi for giving generously of their time and support. Without the hospitality offered by the Department of Science and Methods of Conservation of Cultural Heritage, the conference would not have enjoyed its ideal logistic location. Therefore I would like to thank the Director, Antonio Carile, for agreeing to host the conference in Palazzo Strocchi.

The conference was introduced by Walter Tega, Vice-chancellor of the University of Bologna, with a plenary lecture on the collections of Ulisse Aldrovandi and on the upcoming and lavish series of celebrations sponsored by the University of Bologna to commemorate the fourth centenary of the naturalist’s death. I thank Walter Tega for providing an ideal framework for the aims of the conference.

Last but not least, special thanks go to all the authors as well as to the members and friends of the scientific committee of the ESF Network for their enthusiasm and collaboration.

Marco Beretta

