

RESPECT FOR VENERABLE MUSEUMS CONSIDERATION FOR THE PUBLIC

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The Wagner Free Institute of Science of Philadelphia is also known as *The Wagner Museum*, after its founder William Wagner. It contains a collection of specimens of natural history gathered in the 19th Century by Wagner and the curators and professors of the institute. Birds, mammals, fossils, rocks, minerals, insects, shells, dinosaur bones, all displayed in cherrywood and glass cabinets from 1880s, according to the original “systematic” scheme, offer a rare image of a Victorian science museum.

The museum is not located in a historical or commercial district. It lies in a fairly poor neighborhood, visited by children with few opportunities for extracurricular activities, art students from nearby Temple University, and museum and science people. It is aged, but not dusty; it has no brand new floor tiles, but you reach the upper floors by old wooden stairs, well-preserved and ergonomically designed from the beginning.

The guided tours every Tuesday and Friday include information about the collections, as well as about the house itself. Part of the mission of the institution, along with science education, is preserving intact its interior made in the 1890's. The details of the architecture and display help to immerse the contemporary visitor

in a Victorian-era setting, from the doorknobs and thresholds to the lighting and furniture.

In this museum, with its “fragrance of lavender and moths”, where they don't have 3D glasses or touchscreens, being a visitor myself, I bent over the showcases to *read*: the labels are handwritten by the first curators with pen and ink, not reprinted from an industrial printer, thoroughly organizing these ageless specimens, beautiful in themselves, but also through the simple, repetitive display. My artist's eye was mesmerized by the sophisticated forms and materials, textures and finery. After I returned from this microcosmic reverie, I reminded myself of the purpose for my visit, to find out about their programs with the public.

Although their mission states that access is free for everyone, there are some stipulations to know about: being a national historical monument, any major changes to the structure is forbidden. Having only one staircase, the number of visitors is limited; as there is no elevator, special programs are shown on the ground floor for people with disabilities.

Children, and adults enter every day into the lecture hall for science classes held by specialists from certain institutions in Philadelphia. When the institute was started in 1855, it offered free science classes

(which is why it is called *Free Institute*); since then it has combined independent access to scientific and natural history materials with guided educational programs. Today entrance to the museum is free for everybody, and there is a fee for guided tours.

A program called *GeoKids* has been created for the children of the neighborhood. *GeoKids* "was founded in 1992 on the belief that children have a natural curiosity about many topics in the earth and life sciences and that study of these subjects at an early age can be an effective vehicle for increasing student interest in science as well as learning in general."¹ It lasts for the entire school year. There are at least four schools that are loyal participants. From 1992 until the present, *GeoKids* has evolved. A partnership with the Biology department at St. Joseph University has extended the program. Professors from the same university also participate in the LINKS program, dedicated to "real-life science experiences". The LINKS program was brought more students to the Wagner.

One of the institute's targets is school groups. There are various topics available to be covered with students, using both the Institute's specimens and educational media. Students are involved directly in

the exploration of science with a variety of "hands-on" objects and activities, like worksheets and *scavenger hunts*.

The adults follow college-level science classes; for example: *Surviving "Surviving": The Making of an Exhibit on Human Evolution*; *Molecules that Matter*; *Grasses, Rushes, and Sedges*; *Genetics in the Wild*; *Wildlife Conservation and Genetic*; *Park, Cemetery, and Garden: The Landscapes of Philadelphia*; *Spring Flora of Fairmount Park*. The adult classes are a tradition started by Wagner himself teaching at home. They are now held in various places around Philadelphia, extending the Institute beyond its local area.

The youngest visitors, from pre-kindergarten through 1st grade, can attend 60-minute lessons (including a museum tour) as: *Animal Babies*, *Animals in Winter*, *Day and Nighttime Animals*, *Dinosaurs*, *Insects*, *Prickly and Soft*.

When I arrived in the lecture hall, I noticed that everything still looks like the day it opened. I imagined that someone with an eye for detail, lifting the seats of the chairs, would notice a metal support underneath. If they asked what it was for, they would learn that it was a place to keep a hat. A hundred years ago, no man walked in the street with a bare head, nor kept his hat on inside. During classes or conferences, a man could keep his hat under the seat. Photographs from 1900 and 1907 show the room full of heads with and without hats.

For an American public saturated with modernism and technology, this site might be picturesque,



¹http://www.wagnerfreemuseum.org/edu_child_geokids.shtml



romantic, rustic, cool, or pure and minimalist. Or a national pride.

2009 is *Darwin Year*, and in April and May Philadelphia celebrated "*Evolution Year*". For the organization of public programs and events, Wagner Institute partnered with University of Pennsylvania and its Penn Museum, Franklin Institute, Academy of Natural Sciences, Mutter Museum, Aps Museum, with Philadelphia Zoo, with Free

Library and WHYY radio station.

Not many tourists or Philadelphians end up at the Wagner Museum. But this doesn't mean they're not exposed to science; as listed above, there are plenty of other destinations in Philadelphia for educating the public about science, natural history and the environment.

In the context of the cultural scene in Philadelphia and the country, Wagner Institute has its own position marked out and well-established. It is known on its own terms. Protected by some authorities, no one tries to modernize it; supported financially by other authorities, it is not abandoned to the past. In its old shell lives a membrane that vibrates with the contemporary world. With its aura of *patina*, with an old display, an honest conservation method, and programs constantly updated and aimed at younger generations, a museum can be called modern and contemporary.