

The David H. Koch Hall of Human Origins. National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution. An ongoing exhibition opened March 17, 2010.*

Reviewed by Samuel J. Redman

Exhibitions exploring the subject of human evolution have enjoyed something of a resurgence over the past five years. Until recently, this resurgence was unequivocally headlined by two major exhibitions—a new gallery devoted to evolution at the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago and a human origins hall at the American Museum of Natural History in New York City.¹ These prominent exhibits include casts of fossil specimens of human ancestors and numerous stone tools illustrating the development of early technology. Additionally, a traveling exhibition dedicated to the most famous hominid specimen, Lucy, is currently touring major museums across the United States.² Interest generated by television documentaries, science writing, and continued public debate surrounding the teaching of evolution in schools has no doubt helped fuel a renewed interest in the evolution of our species. On March 17, 2010, the National Museum of Natural History (NMNH), Smithsonian Institution, added to these examples with the opening of its \$20.7 million, 15,000 square foot, David H. Koch Hall of Human Origins (Clough 2010:16). The convergence of these events is perhaps unprecedented in the history of anthropology in the United States, although audiences certainly experienced blockbuster exhibitions and mass media attention on the subjects of human origins and human prehistory in the past.³ While the nature of exhibits has changed to a striking degree over the past century, the role of the media in promoting the ideas presented in these exhibitions has remaining startlingly consistent. Ancient bones, stone tools, and artistic reconstructions of our distant ancestors have consistently proven to be solid media fodder, working to both sell newspapers and increase museum attendance.

The opening of the Smithsonian's Hall of Human Origins was intended to coincide with the National Museum of Natural History's 100th anniversary. Viewed from a historical perspective, the decision to celebrate the museum's anniversary with the opening of a new hall dedicated to paleoanthropology is laced with irony. When the museum opened on the National Mall a century ago, the museum's curator of physical anthropology Ales Hrdlicka received virtually no exhibition space for his growing collection of human remains. Hrdlicka struggled to convince museum administrators at the Smithsonian to display collections related to physical anthropology throughout much of his career. His efforts at the Smithsonian stifled, he eventually turned to external venues for exhibit space, organizing displays on the subjects of racial classification and human evolution for the Panama-California Exposition in San Diego in 1915 (Rydell 1984:208-233) and for a temporary exhibition organized by the International Congress of Eugenics in the early 1920s at the American Museum of Natural History (Hrdlicka n.d.). It was not until much later, when physical anthropologist T. Dale Stewart (1901-1997) became an administrator at the NMNH, that the subject was given greater access to exhibit space (Stewart 1975).

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Like the historical exhibitions preceding it, the new David H. Koch Hall of Human Origins relies on dramatic artistic illustrations and reconstructions in order to demonstrate the evolution of various traits in specific species. An article appearing in the *San Diego Union* newspaper following the opening of the Science of Man exhibition at the Panama-California Exposition instructed visitors, “To fully appreciate the importance of the exhibit in the Science of Man exhibition, one must bring with him a lively imagination and attempt to visualize the conditions under which primitive man must have struggled (Wilkinson n.d).” The visitor to the gallery in San Diego was not expected to rely on imagination alone, however, as busts of human ancestors, charts and graphs, and actual human remains assisted them in understanding the already complex ideas behind the developing field of paleoanthropology. The bronzes featured throughout the Smithsonian’s new gallery are surprisingly reminiscent of the bronzes Smithsonian staff commissioned for the San Diego fair nearly 100 years ago. In 1915, as with today, artistic license was buttressed with a sentiment of scientific certainty running throughout museum exhibits. During the past century, even the attentive visitor typically received few clues as to when an exhibition on human evolution is explaining claims based on a greater or lesser body of evidence. Though it maintains something of a sentiment of scientific certainty, the new Smithsonian exhibit notably differentiates itself from previous displays in articulating the body of evidence upon which scholars are making their claims.

While other recent exhibitions have successfully displayed the complex ideas of paleoanthropology, the Smithsonian’s new exhibit accomplishes this task with striking clarity. It utilizes stunning and imaginative new technologies and artistic renderings that would have certainly surprised historical exhibit designers. Compared to other, more recent attempts to display these themes, the new Smithsonian exhibition is well thought out in terms of both layout and aesthetic appeal. Perhaps most significantly, the David H. Koch Hall of Human Origins provides visitors with experiences that other recent displays have failed to achieve. This includes a rather comprehensive presentation of evidence gleaned from thousands of fossilized skeletons and early tools discovered over the past century and a half. Whereas other, similar, displays have provided examples, say of a handful of cast skulls, the Smithsonian now shows visitors a comprehensive family tree; over 75 skull reproductions (Clough 2010:16) throughout the exhibit, including a floor-to-ceiling case filled with skulls in the middle of the exhibition. The Smithsonian displays guide the visitor through the development of their own bipedalism, the evolution of the human brain, and an explanation of early hunting techniques.

The Smithsonian also offers visitors an opportunity to experience something that museum visitors in the United States have only witnessed in touring exhibitions, the actual remains of a human ancestor—the bones of a Neanderthal acquired by Smithsonian scientists in Iraq in the 1950s. Curator Rick Potts, who serves as the Director of the Smithsonian’s Human Origins Program, recently described the specimen as, “the Hope Diamond of the Human Origins collection” (Edwards 2010:18). An additional pair of skulls—a Neanderthal and Cro-Magnon, both on loan from the Musée de l’Homme in Paris—add favorably to the experience of seeing original specimens first hand.

Regrettably, all three of these new exhibitions continue provide us with a limited historical perspective on the development of paleoanthropology. Though in a few instances, historical discoveries are mentioned throughout these exhibitions (for example, mentioning the first

discoveries of human ancestors outside of Africa, the discovery of the famed Lucy specimen and, in the case of the Smithsonian's new gallery, an explanation of the acquisition of the Neanderthal skeleton) visitors would certainly benefit from a more complete explanation of the chronological development of the science behind our existing theories. The historical consciousness displayed in the American Anthropological Association's recent touring exhibition on the subject of race (*Race: Are We So Different?*) provides a possible model for how historical perspectives might create more complete exhibitions in this manner (Penn, Laden, and Tostevin 2008; Redman 2010). According to at least one author, a recent exhibition at Yale's Peabody Museum attempted to introduce the colorful characters who have peopled the field of paleoanthropology to museum audiences (Gibbons:2006, 205) In addition to providing visitors with important context surrounding these major discoveries, the history of paleoanthropology itself sometimes reads like the script of a daytime soap opera (filled with turf wars, battles over scientific interpretation, and attacks verging on the downright personal). This sort of historical narrative, done correctly, provides visitors with insight into how scientists arrive at their conclusions about human evolution. Further, I argue that a historical perspective is incredibly important in light of the continued use of outdated scientific theories by creationists in the United States. As a historian, this critique might be somewhat predictable, and the danger in engaging with this particular narrative is that curators run the risk of making the story more about the men and women who hunt for fossils, than the much larger story of evolution as told by the fossils. The overall accomplishments of all of the recent exhibitions on human evolution should be lauded, despite these critiques. While the NMNH exhibition provides visitors with valuable information about current research in the field (much of it conducted by Smithsonian scientists) exhibits like this might be strengthened by demonstrating how these ideas developed by explaining where previous ideas held by anthropologists failed.

These critiques aside, anthropologists have reason to celebrate the opening of the Smithsonian's new David H. Koch Hall of Human Origins. It provides a new standard for the explanation of complex ideas, aesthetic appeal, and the utilization of original and replica materials. Museums hoping to create similar exhibitions might learn valuable lessons from the new approaches utilized by the Smithsonian.

Notes

1. The Field Museum of Natural History's *Evolving Planet* exhibition opened in 2006. See <http://www.fieldmuseum.org/evolvingplanet/index.html>, accessed March 17, 2010. The American Museum of Natural History's Anne and Bernard Spitzer Hall of Human Origins opened in 2007. See <http://www.amnh.org/exhibitions/permanent/humanorigins/>, accessed March 12, 2010.
2. Houston Museum of Natural Science. *Lucy's Legacy—The Hidden Treasures of Ethiopia*. <http://lucyexhibition.hmns.org/about-the-exhibit.aspx>, accessed March 12, 2010.
3. This history is one of the primary subjects of my dissertation project, *Human Remains and the Construction of Race and History in the United States, 1897-1945*.

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