

Biological Revaluation of Naturalistic Collections in Teratology

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Since very ancient times, there has been a significant interest in "monstruous" human beings¹⁻². Also, this interest has led to the ancestors of modern scientific museums: the Chambers of Wonders.

While studying some naturalistic collections², our attention was drawn to some congenital malformations in animals. Our aim was to discriminate between modern cases which for sure had not been collected for display (e.g. stuffed animals, like the two-headed chick at the Eusebio Museum of Alba) and cases that had probably been used for scientific experiments, which were quite popular in the past, as also shown by contemporary literature.

In total, two recent malformation cases (Fig. 1) - shortly to be put on display in a museum - have been investigated, as well as seven cases already belonging to naturalistic collections (Fig. 2). The age of the animal (individuals with malformities are unlikely to survive natural selection) and the presence of elements that were suspicious of human intervention were used as discriminating factors.

Among the cases we have examined, the one of a guinea pig having the size of a grown up animal is worth mentioning ("Cavia Sinota", an autosite, sysomus and diprosopus double monster). Fig. 3.

This specimen belongs to the Pathological Anatomy Museum of the University of Turin³. Owing to the severity of malformations of this animal, we would assume that it was kept in captivity, in order to survive to adult age. Such an assumption is confirmed by the fact that it is a typical laboratory animal but, above all, by the high level of arsenic found in the preservation fluid, which would indirectly prove the fact that it did not die of natural causes. Hence, we can conclude in this instance that a scientific study case dating back to the beginning of the 20th century might be hiding behind a mere museum item.

References

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Fig. 1.



Fig. 2.



Fig. 3.