200 Years of the Natural History Museum Basel

An Overview

When naturalists from all over Switzerland arrived in Basel for their annual meeting in summer 1821, the city's new "natural history museum" wasn't yet finished, much to the hosts' regret. The local government had approved its establishment in Falkensteinerhof at 11 Münsterplatz on 14 March of the same year. The conversion began immediately, but the museum didn't open until autumn 1821, when it became home to a zoological and a mineralogical collection, a scientific library, physics apparatus and a chemistry laboratory.

The makeshift conditions in the 17th century three-storey building were cramped. Chemistry professor Christian Friedrich Schönbein made his pioneering discoveries of ozone (1839) and nitrocellulose (1846) in a laboratory converted from a laundry room where his wife occasionally took a bath. But professors and independent scholars like mathematician Daniel Huber, educational reformer Christoph Bernoulli and geologist Peter Merian were glad to finally have their own building for their departments. This was mainly thanks to the university reform of 1818. The physics apparatus, chemistry laboratory and the library in Falkensteinerhof came from the property of the university, while the exhibitions presented natural history specimens from valuable collections put together by prosperous Basel residents. It had already been possible to marvel at the famous Amerbach Cabinet in the "Haus zur Mücke" on the Schlüsselberg. However, scholars like lawyer Remigius Faesch, doctor Felix Platter and theologian Hieronymus d'Annone also collected notable "cabinets of curiosities" from the 16th to 18th century. The collection at the museum in Falkensteinerhof was soon augmented by show-pieces from Basel missionaries, merchants or emigrants.

Following the separation of the canton in 1833, just twelve years after the establishment of Falkensteinerhof, its collections were at risk of being split up. In the end, the half-cantons agreed to pay compensation to the canton of Basel-Land. The people of Basel now felt all the more obligated to help their new museum, by donating generous amounts and collection specimens.
In 1841, just twenty years after the opening, calls were made for a bigger building. In 1844, building work began on the monumental "Museum der Stadt Basel" on the grounds of the former Augustinian monastery – it encompassed natural sciences, as well as art, antiques and the university library. The building was designed by respected Basel architect Melchior Berri, member of the cantonal great council

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and building contractor. The magnificent classical building was officially opened in 1849. The Amerbach Cabinet also found a new, prestigious home there.

The building on Augustinergasse housed the museum for around 175 years, but its contents were always changing. The "Natural History (instead of "scientific") Museum" was mentioned for the first time in 1867. In 1878, a lecture theatre built like an amphitheatre had to make way for the growing collection. The Physikalische Institut [Institute of Physics], anatomy and the university library got their own, new building in the last quarter of the 19th century. Around the turn of the century, the "ethnographische Abteilung" [Department of Ethnography] became what would later be the "Völkerkundemuseum" that moved into its own building between 1914 and 1917. It shared an entrance with the Natural History Museum Basel for around one hundred years.
The Public Art Collection eventually moved out in 1920: The famous paintings by artists such as Hans Holbein the Younger ended up hanging in the attic of Berri's building. Basel's own Kunstmuseum [Museum of Art] didn't open until 1936.

The museum's founding century was shaped by two public figures: Peter Merian and Ludwig Rütimeyer. Merian (1795 – 1883), geologist, polymath and local politician for many years dedicated his entire professional life to the building. He was succeeded by Rütimeyer (1825 – 1895) who built up an enormous osteological collection with bones from over 1000 animal species, including some fossils. As the museum's director, the zoologist and palaeontologist wanted more space and quiet in the building, more research and less public accessibility. However, his wish for a new building on Peterplatz remained unfulfilled. The museum on the Münsterberg drew in the crowds from its opening until the turn of the century. The people of Basel flocked to it after church on Sundays in such great numbers that some rooms were always hopelessly overcrowded.

Only Hans Georg Stehlin (1870 – 1941), a grandson of Peter Merian, managed full restructuring after the First World War: When the museum reopened in July 1932, New Objectivity had arrived. A temple of breathtaking exhibits became an educational institution. Only selected exhibits were presented by subject area. However, the visitors probably preferred the dusty charm of the rooms packed full of exotic show-pieces as they no longer came in such great numbers.

Scientific progress can't be stopped. Even since the turn of the century, a whole new field of research had opened up to Basel natural scientists and geologists in particular. There was international demand

for their knowledge for oil exploration, especially in countries such as the former colonial parts of South-east Asia and the Caribbean. Prominent geologists like August Tobler (1872 – 1929) and Hans Gottfried Kugler (1893 – 1986) accepted the challenge. During the second half of their life, they dedicated their time, specialist knowledge and money to the Natural History Museum. Kugler also initiated its American Deep Sea Drilling Project, a research project exploring the earth's crust beneath the sea bed.

The influence of mass media, especially television, on the public had been growing since the end of the 1950s. The Natural History Museum also had to take a new direction. One of the exhibits that was finished in 1960 was the "Cave Bear Diorama" that made a big impression on younger visitors. In addition to spectacularly showcasing native natural history, zoologist Eduard Handschin (1894 – 1962), who became the museum's first full-time director in 1956, also sought to intensify the scientific work of his departments. However, it was only possible to extend the building under his successor Hans W. Schaub (1913 – 1994): A basement was added to the inner courtyard between 1968 and 1972 to make room for the constantly growing collections. Intermediate floors were built into the high, classical halls of the Berri building. Some art historians criticised the architectonic "mutilation" of the imperial building, but its success proved the museum right. From 1980, over 80,000 visitors came each year, around twice as many as in the 1950s. Up until the coronavirus crisis, this number increased again by a good 50 percent and was at over 127,000 in 2018.

To reach a younger audience, the museum has been offering children's tours since 1969. In 1980, two dedicated members of staff voluntarily founded the "Kids' Club" where groups of 20 to 25 seven to eleven-year-olds explore behind the scenes of the museum, make model animals or identify fossils. It was enormously popular, with over 200 children getting involved every year. It has now been replaced by the "Kitz-Club" for eleven to sixteen-year-olds. The Museum der Kulturen (formerly "Völkerkundemuseum") was reopened in a new building following its fundamental transformation and now has its own entrance via the Rollerhof on Münsterplatz.

The Natural History Museum put on another big growth spurt in 1997 with late German industrialist Georg Frey's beetle collection. A dedicated Basel citizens' association had been fighting for it for years. There were many legal obstacles to overcome before the 6,700 display cases with over two million preserved beetles could move into the Natural History Museum and help its entomological collection to become world-class.

The natural history collections have now grown to 11.8 million items. This size of collection makes the Natural History Museum Basel one of the largest natural history museums in the world. An incredible wealth has accumulated in Basel over the centuries and created an inexhaustible and valuable repository of knowledge.

Biodiversity, the formation of the Earth and the development of life – the issues that have always been at the forefront of the Natural History Museum Basel – are becoming increasingly pressing 200 years after its establishment. But the venerable Berri building is no longer the right place. A new home for the Natural History Museum Basel and the State Archive Basel-Stadt is currently being built at the former St. Johann railway station. Over 60 percent of Basel residents who voted in a referendum agreed to the costs and planning for this new building.

The move is planned for 2026 and the museum is expected to reopen to the public in 2028. The new building will show off the wonderful collections of butterflies, birds and fossils from over 200 years in a new light and also provide a suitable location for modern environmental and natural science research.