

This Month in Moravian History

A monthly newsletter published by the Moravian Archives in Bethlehem,
commemorating events from Moravian History

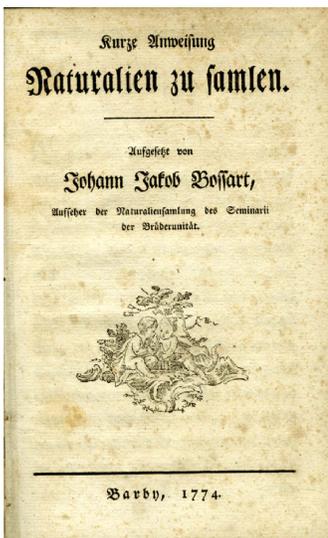
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“For delight and instruction”

Moravian collections of natural history and ethnology

Moravians have long understood the benefit of using objects in education. The first time a Moravian natural history collection was mentioned was on August 13, 1758, in the records of the Moravian theological seminary at Barby. The 19th century saw the establishment of many similar collections and museums throughout the Unity. Two hundred fifty years later items from the Moravian mission fields are still being assembled and displayed, carrying on this long Moravian tradition of cultural education through objects.



Even before the establishment of the natural history collection in Barby, Moravian missionaries collected objects and folk art from the mission fields for use in their reports and presentations. This practice was similar to assembling a “cabinet of curiosities” popular among the European nobility and the middle class of the time. August Hermann Francke displayed such a collection at his school in Halle, which Zinzendorf attended. According to the fashion of his time, Zinzendorf himself became an avid collector of conch shells. While living in England Zinzendorf served as one of sixty trustees

governing the collection of his Chelsea neighbor, Sir Hans Sloane, the London collector and physician. After Sloane’s death in 1753 the trustees brokered the sale of his collection to the nation, and with this act essentially formed the British Museum in London - the first such public institution in Europe.

As early as in 1741 Bishop Polycarp Müller wished to establish a natural history collection at the Moravian theological seminary. However, frequent changes in the school’s location made a permanent space for the collection impossible. A space for the collection was found when the Barby castle was enlarged in 1756 after the school was moved there in 1754. The first curator of this collection was Friedrich Adam Scholler, who was also lecturer and librarian at the school. Johann Jakob Bossart succeeded him as curator in 1769. With the help of missionaries and scientists Bossart meticulously

researched the collection, and within a few years produced the first catalog of objects. In 1774 Bossart published “Brief Instructions on How to Collect Natural History Objects” (see the image of the title page). Because of his efforts the collections grew and garnered considerable public attention, including a visit from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe in 1776. Many Moravians got involved by acting as collectors, realizing that items gleaned from mission fields could be used to educate others and improve the success of the Moravian missions by fostering a better understanding of the people they served.

In 1809 a natural history collection was established in Niesky and opened as the first public museum in Upper Lusatia. Here the collection was connected to the boys’ school, so that many students could view the objects and develop an appreciation for collecting as part of their education. This led to the establishment of many more collections in various Moravian institutions, including the Unity Archives in 1842, the boys’ school in Kleinwelka in 1872, and the ethnological museum in Herrnhut in 1878. Other museums were established in the Moravian communities of Zeist, Christiansfeld, Prangins, Königsfeld, London, Nazareth and Bethlehem, some of which are still in existence today. Some collections eventually closed and some were partially destroyed as a result of World War II (London and Niesky).

The ethnological museum in Herrnhut is still in existence (Völkerkundemuseum) and we thank its director, Stephan Augustin, for contributing this text.

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