

FEATURE ARTICLE

# Travelling Museums and Itinerant Collections in Nineteenth-Century Latin America

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There is one genre of museums that remains little understood — travelling collections. These museums put on display natural history collections, anatomical specimens, and ethnographical models in wax. Maintained by itinerate charlatans and impresarios, their exhibits were displayed and interpreted in ever changing varieties. Travelling museums appealed to both the general public and the scientific community. As is evident from the reviews in newspapers and the catalogues that spread information about the specimens on display, travelling museums blurred the boundaries between science, commerce, and entertainment.

Based on the analysis of sources dispersed across several repositories and archives in South America and Europe, and focusing on travelling museums that passed through Buenos Aires in the 1880s, this paper sheds new light on the manifold social and cultural practices involved in the circulation of knowledge.

KEYWORDS

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In 1885, 30 boxes of wax figures arrived at the port of Buenos Aires from Europe, intended for a new variety show. The Customs House agreed to exempt them from import taxes, giving the owners six months to put the aforementioned cargo on another ship back home.<sup>1</sup> These boxes contained what would become one of the many itinerant museums that in Buenos Aires and other cities exploited public interest in exhibits of bodies and healthy and pathological anatomical parts.

The owners initially requested permission from the Municipality to open the anatomical-pathological museum in the top floors of the National Theater on a central street in Buenos Aires.<sup>2</sup> It was eventually inaugurated in the theatre's foyer and upper salon as 'Barnum's artistic, scientific, anatomical and pathological

museum', a name reminiscent of the famous New York museum destroyed by fire in 1865.<sup>3</sup>

The Baernoum anatomical museum contained many anatomical and pathological objects and a great number of 'germs, the origin of the majority of the illnesses that afflict humanity'. In addition, there were instruments on display that were used by the Inquisition. The exposition finished with a collection of mechanical figures.<sup>4</sup>

The Buenos Aires newspaper *La Patria Argentina*<sup>5</sup> reviewed the 'Baernoum anatomical-pathological museum' in the following terms:

Its proportions, not completely exiguous, are far from reaching those that pathological anatomy has already reached, as the museum shows the pathology of a reduced number of diseases, in addition to others for whose exhibition there is a small 'Cabinet reserved for gentlemen', according to a little sign next to the door of the mysterious room. The museum's figures are all made of wax. They are different sizes, large and small, of natural or reduced dimensions. In addition to what it shows or hides, according to the gender of the visitor, in the reserved salon one runs into anatomical preparations, ostentatious pieces and monstrosities, allegorical figures and even with alterations produced by a clever combination of mirrors.<sup>6</sup>

Descriptions of this kind — even using the same words — could be found in the newspapers published in many different cities across the Americas and Europe from the early 1850s. The Baernoum pathological museum not only visited Buenos Aires twice in five years but in 1910 the same collection was also advertised in Mérida (Yucatan, Mexico).<sup>7</sup> Far from being a local singular event, the Baernoum exhibition in Buenos Aires was just one of the several popular travelling anatomical collections that visited the most important Latin American cities.

As Michael Sappol has correctly noted, despite their astonishing popularity in the cultural life of the urban centres in Europe and America for more than a hundred years, by the middle of the twentieth century these popular anatomical museums had disappeared from memory and history.<sup>8</sup> Only recently have several scholars begun to recover their meaning by discussing the boundaries/frontiers between science, entertainment, and commerce. Sappol and other historians have focused on certain American and English cities, providing a renewed and thick panorama of how these museums worked in the Victorian world.<sup>9</sup> Whereas exploring the local impact of such phenomena on particular large cities has the advantage of showing the nuances of their situations, the events that happened in London and New York are not typical enough to explain the impact of these museums in the remainder of the world.

As this paper shows, popular anatomical museums were a kind of enterprise that reached far beyond the Victorian universe. While in the cities of the Northern hemisphere — particularly in English-speaking countries — these museums were treated as a threat to public morality, restricted to men, they were seen very differently in other countries by their police and their scientific circles. Moreover, given that some of these travelling museums represented a kind of transnational undertaking, they carried ideas and exhibits from country to country, from town to town, from the fair to the academic museum, from the hospital to the theatre,

from sideshow to science.<sup>10</sup> Thus, travelling museums circulated models of exhibition and visualization later adopted in the new field of dermatology.<sup>11</sup> In this sense, this paper proposes that itinerant museums of the late nineteenth century have to be understood as providing a space for the mobilization and creation of objects for both science and the entertainment industry.

Travelling displays contrast with both their contemporary trend to construct permanent structures for prestigious collections — the nineteenth-century classical natural history museums<sup>12</sup> — and with current definitions of a museum that presume a stable, defined, sedentary space. Also, in contrast to fieldwork and travel, the museum has been described as a destination and a point of departure. Yet, the emergence of these permanent museums in dedicated monumental buildings did not encompass and therefore did not erase the previous uses of the word ‘museum’.<sup>13</sup> It is probably this identification of a museum with a permanent structure that best explains why other types of museums such as the ‘itinerant’, very common in the nineteenth century, have become invisible to twentieth-century historians.<sup>14</sup> Besides, except for press releases, catalogues, and reports published in the press, there are few traces of these alternative museums for historians to draw on. Dispersed among several archival repositories and libraries in Europe and the Americas, this dispersion has also contributed to the invisibility of the itinerant character of popular anatomical museums. This paper draws together the few traces left by travelling museums in the collections of newspapers and pamphlets of the Argentine and Bolivian National Libraries, as well as periodicals from the Argentine provinces, to analyse those travelling museums that passed through Buenos Aires during the 1880s and to discuss their significance in a global context.

## Popular anatomical museums

The Baernoum was one of many popular anatomical museums, i.e. commercial, travelling companies that went from city to city, staying about two months and setting up in some adequate space, like the foyer or upper floors of a theatre. In the Argentine National Library, there are two catalogues from this particular collection — one published in Paris in 1885 and the other in Buenos Aires in 1890 (Figure 1).<sup>15</sup> The second contains a list of the pieces found in the so-called private room. In 1885, little ‘could’ be said about this men’s-only corner: ‘it is a small room, somewhat dark, in which various boxes are, displayed with [...] something that we will not mention, because the ad requires great reserve’.<sup>16</sup> Actually, as the 1890 catalogue shows, the room contained wax models of venereal diseases, more specifically, their external manifestation and the effects they produced on the skin of different body parts. The Argentine National Library also has an Italian catalogue from 1860 of the ‘Anatomical and Ethnological Museum of Henri Dessort’, which included a ‘gabinetto riservato’ (reserved cabinet) with pieces similar to those displayed in Buenos Aires (Figure 2).<sup>17</sup>

The so-called ‘reserved cabinet’ was not a creation of the travelling museums; on the contrary, it had its origins in the Italian art museums. It was the name given to that special room, which contained ‘atrocious objects’ in the Museo Borbonico of

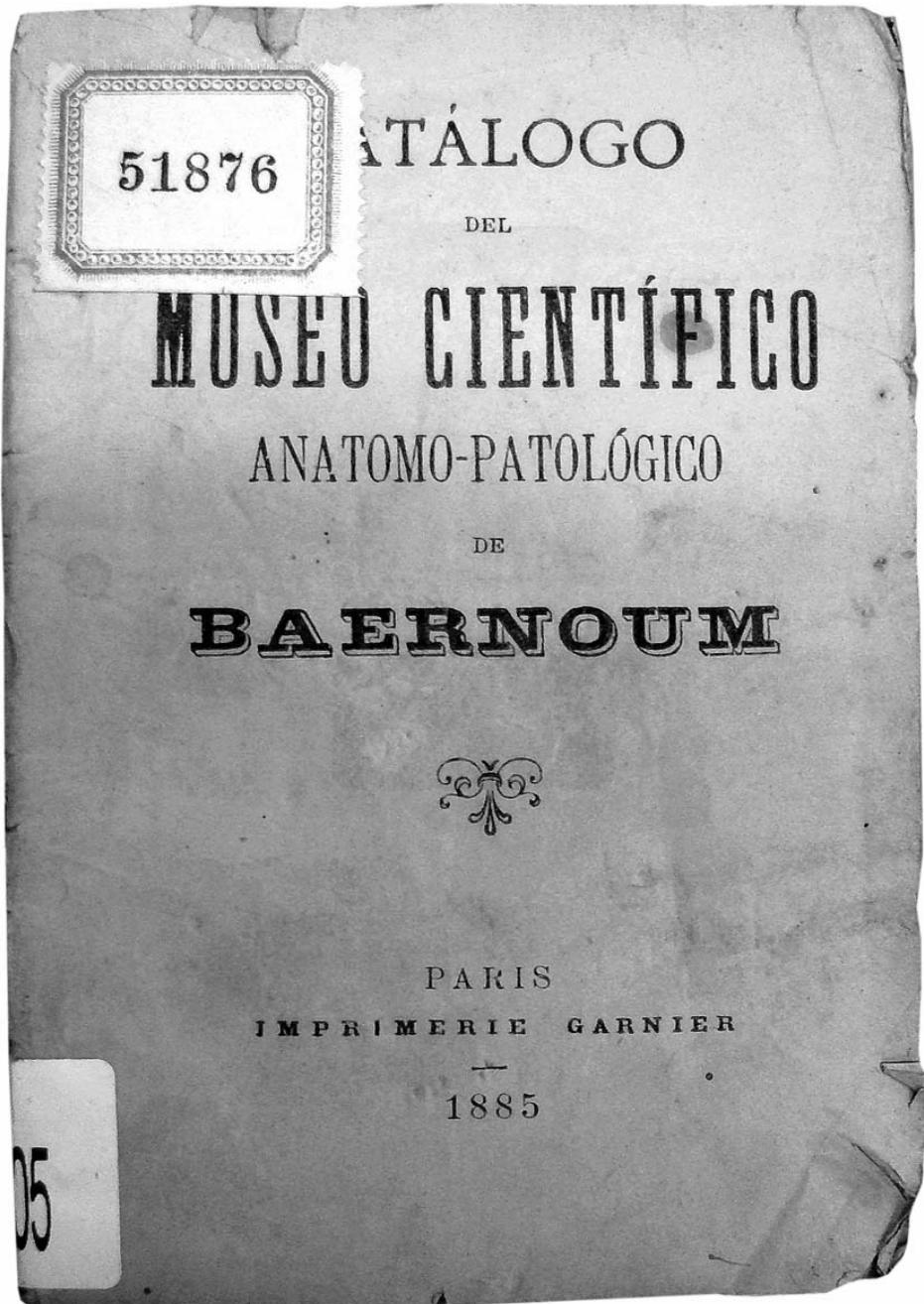


FIGURE 1 Catalogue of Barnoum Museum.  
*Courtesy Biblioteca Nacional de la República Argentina*

Naples. Contrary to other rooms, the access to the reserved cabinets tended to be rather difficult. To see the images of vice, foreigners had to obtain permission from the Minister of Interior, with the recommendation of the ambassador. Throughout

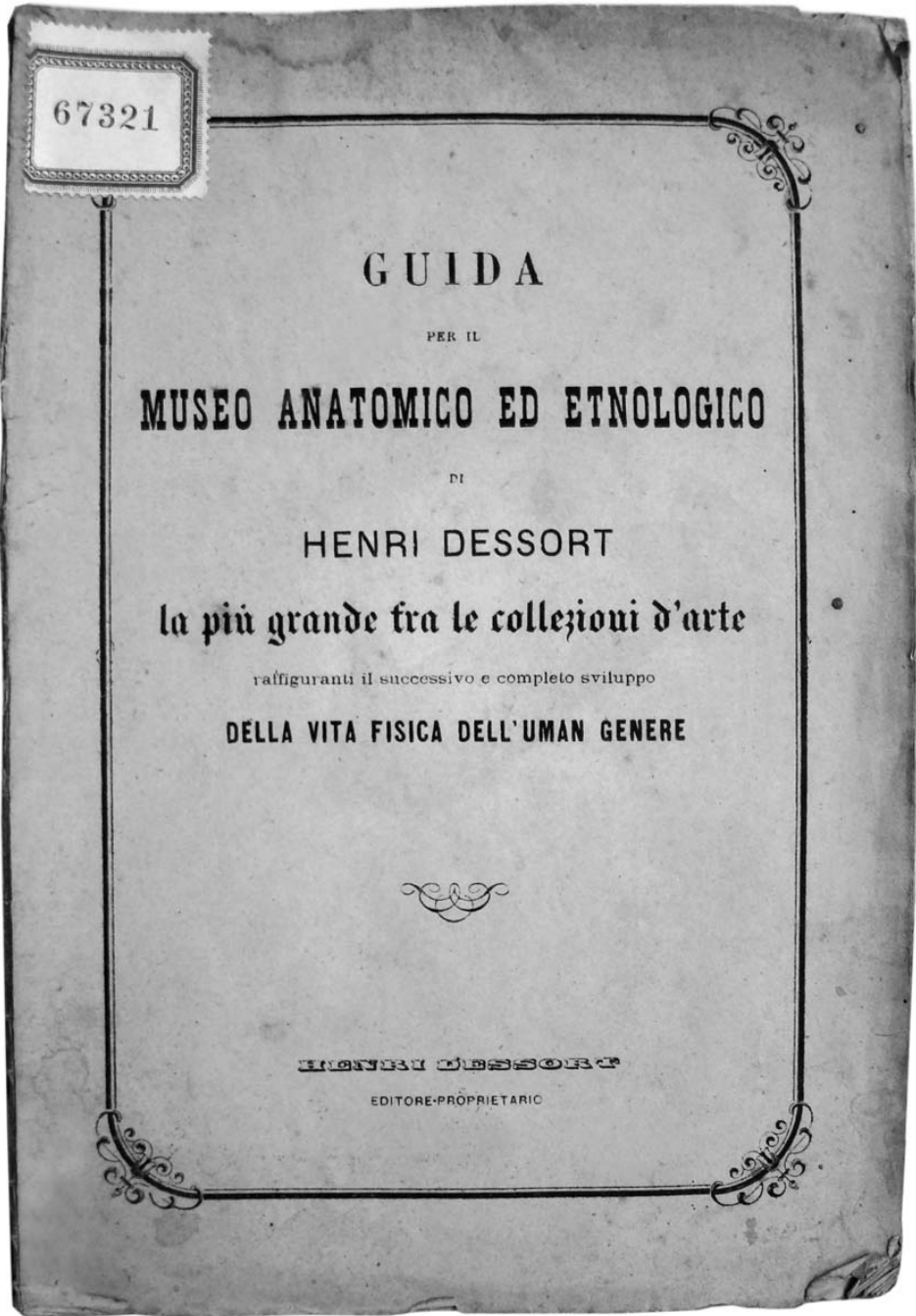


FIGURE 2 Catalogue of Dessort Museum.  
 Courtesy Biblioteca Nacional de la República Argentina

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the nineteenth century, the tendency to remove the Venuses, the Satyrs, and most of the naked figures to a 'secret cabinet' extended to other collections, such as the Capitol in Rome. Art lovers stressed that, as visitors were likely to enter with lascivious ideas, the creation of such secret cabinets in the art museums turned the naked figures into 'immoral and scandalous' objects. By separating these items from the general collection, the 'secret cabinet' — far from actually hiding the objects — rendered them even more titillating than they otherwise would have been.<sup>18</sup> At the Natural History Museum of Florence, early in the 1850s there were several rooms that were closed to the public, exhibiting waxes that displayed the different stages of pregnancy and child delivery, as well as of the putrefaction of corpses and the impact of the plague on the human body.<sup>19</sup>

Travelling museums adopted the reserved cabinet in the sense noted by the critics of such installations in the art museums. Moreover, even when the reviews by the Argentine physicians were not totally positive, they reinforced the attraction by respecting the secrecy and the mystery of the objects exhibited in the secret rooms. Travelling museums not only adopted the 'secret room' from permanent institutions, they replicated the objects exhibited in anatomical museums such as the wax Venuses and the models displaying the stages of pregnancy and also organized their sections following the order given to collections in the academic collections of Italy, Vienna, or France. Thus, the rooms of the Baernoum were classified as 'deformities and natural phenomena', 'anatomical preparations', 'pathology' (the section with the most pieces), 'operations', 'germs, bacteria, infusoria, etc., according to Koch and Pasteur', and 'ethnography'. The catalogue of the Dessort Museum, on the other hand, highlighted its 'largest collection of art depicting the successive and complete development of the physical life of mankind', and was divided into two sections revealing this evolution from an anatomical and then ethnological standpoint. Over 600 specimens and exhibits were on view, including a selection of pathological preparations, beginning with the development of the foetus, the depiction of various diseases, as well as complete human skeletons. In the 'Gabinetto Riservato' one could see 'la Vergine' and 'Gli Ermafroditi', as well as syphilis victims. The ethnological section included an example of a Caucasian, a Mongolian, Native Americans, as well as native Australians.

This type of exhibition of the outward symptoms of syphilis had proliferated in Europe as commercial, travelling museums, at the margins of medicine but often used by medical doctors for educational purposes. The so-called 'anatomical museums' or 'popular anatomical museums' were valued differently in each country, according to the existing regulations and the reception afforded by the medical schools. In London, the museums were considered a sort of plague — prolific, and difficult for the authorities to control. Thus, the London press noted with almost admiring surprise that in Vienna the museums enjoyed a certain positive reputation, to the extent of advertising in the *Wiener medizinische Wochenschrift*. In that magazine, doctors received the announcement, illustrated with a cranium, for the 'Reimer Anatomical Museum, the most famous in existence', where men were admitted for 18 farthings from 10 to 7 daily and women on Tuesdays and Fridays after 2 p.m.<sup>20</sup> The ethnological and anatomical

museum of J. W. Reimer had also been in Berlin during the winter of 1859–60, where F. H. du Bois-Reymond visited it to observe the organs of phonation.<sup>21</sup> When Reimer set up in Leicester Square, access was limited to men, placing the show in a category that was close to prostitution.<sup>22</sup> In fact, in England and the United States, the authorities condemned these museums as interesting only to those morbidly inclined. Curiously, for the owners of anatomical museums, these countries were the Mecca of anatomical education, where fathers could bring their children to hospitals to observe the consequences of badly treated syphilis.

Indeed, these collections passed through Berlin, Vienna, Milan, London, New York, and Buenos Aires for decades, feeding interest in anatomy and ethnology, embalming, wax models, and the medical semantics for self-diagnosing venereal diseases before the treatment of syphilis and gonorrhoea was considered a specialty of professional medicine.<sup>23</sup> As the justification of anatomical museums in the preface of the Baernoum museum catalogue indicated:

In general nothing will be as useful as the particular knowledge of the human body, of its organs and their functions [...] Now, there is no reason that explains why governments, which should employ every method to strengthen the health of their citizens and to favor their physical development, do not encourage the study of, increase in and growth of anatomical-pathological museums. Their objection that these museums could offend public sensibilities with exhibitions of this type is of little value given that no immodest act — that we know of — has been represented in such a museum, whose admission, on the other hand is prohibited for children and adolescents.<sup>24</sup>

Thus, the promoters of the anatomical museum were proponents of a sort of lay education in self-observation of body parts and the development of illness. In open cooperation with the doctors and the development of modern medicine, they fought against popular cures and ignorance of the ‘human machine’. On this point, Argentine reviews commented:

the catalogue that lists all of these preparations, after classifying the illness, says [...] ‘produced for having preferred the advice of a quack over those of a doctor.’ This pronouncement has drawn the attention of more than one person who has said: isn’t the preparer of these pieces a quack? As knowledgeable as he seems to be in the effects of quackery, one is inclined to respond affirmatively.<sup>25</sup>

Various authors have pointed out that these museums were run by supposed ‘doctors’ who, in reality, exploited them as propaganda for their curative methods; appealing to this medical and hygienic discourse, these ‘quacks’ used the anatomical museum as a stage from which to accuse their competitors of incompetence and offer the true possibility of a cure. This explains the distrust of medical colleges in various cities, where the promoters of these museums were seen as vendors of dangerous and divergent treatments. However, in truth, when one tries to draw a line between commercial initiatives, doctors’ offices, and university medicine, it is quite difficult due to the permeability in practice that existed between those areas.

Some chronicles of the travelling museums and their private rooms say that the regulations excluding certain persons were easily breached with an extra payment,

thanks to which curious adolescents gained access to these wax bodies. The newspapers, aside from impugning certain aspects of the collections, reinforced this juvenile attraction, feeding interest, curiosity, and intrigue in the museum. Despite being criticized for the somewhat ‘artistic’ reproductions or the outright mistakes made in their anatomical science, the Baernoum museum maintained that a patient of syphilis would have had the occasion to study in an anatomical-pathological museum the damage that advanced and untreated syphilis can produce in the human body. Thus, these museums argued that they aim do something that was not permitted for the medical school collections. In medical schools access to the rooms and anatomical museums was only available to their students and professors, while the Baernoum museum used the display of the damage caused by diseases — in particular syphilis — as a way to encourage treatment and avoid them spreading.

Indeed, there are many testimonies by doctors of every specialty who hurried to visit these temporary museums in order to observe the newest methods of anatomical representation and the pathologies they collected. In fact, from 1889 onwards, the models found in the private rooms of commercial museums were consolidated in institutional spaces of medicine as part of a new specialization — dermatovenerology, the dermatological and syphilographic study of venereal diseases. The creation of the dermatological museum in Paris’ Hôpital Saint-Louis and its inauguration during the 1889 World’s Fair is a milestone in this sense,<sup>26</sup> and it reminds us, once more, of the link between the modelling craftsmen and the development of those wax models.<sup>27</sup> The 1889 inauguration was the initial point of departure for a wave of similar museums in various medical schools throughout Europe and America that, undoubtedly, lured the medical professionals away from the popular anatomical museums.

## Mummies and travelling waxes

The Baernoum museum, in addition to the reserved section, contained a gallery of deformities and natural phenomena — two hands with six fingers each; a heart with double aorta; the head of a man-dog; the head of Carolina Sörenson de Bergen (Norway), known as the ‘Lettuce Face,’ that of another young women from the same place with an apple-shaped growth on her head; Rosa and Josefa Blaksek (or Blaschck), Siamese twins born in Bohemia, Austria, joined at the hip, who, according to the catalogue, were still alive and had never been separated from one another; and several dwarves, some of whom came from Mexico and were called birdmen, others who were enclosed in a crystal cage, representing a trio of singing dwarves touring the United States at the time. It also displayed the head of a gin drinker from Rotterdam to exhibit the ‘effect of the abuse of cocktails’.<sup>28</sup>

The most famous display was the head completely covered in hair, whose eyes, nose and mouth disappeared under a true mountain of bristle:

bristle and not hair is what must cover the face of who was the owner of that head in life. The catalogue says that this poor woman was named Julia Pastrana, came from Mexico and was a dancer. How many enthusiastic ovations Julia must have received!<sup>29</sup>



These collections of wax heads and organs came mostly from Europe and formed part of the circuit integrated by science, circus, and museums. One characteristic that separated them from natural history museums was that the body parts were exhibited with the name of the real person to whom they had belonged or still belonged. Far from preserving the anonymity of class or series, the almost monstrous pathological cases conserved their individual identity, including full name and national origin. Moreover, the waxes were of people who could actually be found in some circus or fair throughout the world. While someone else sold their work, these people negotiated their body and name in the market of bourgeois curiosities. In the Dessort catalogue, there is a hermaphrodite from Berlin who had stopped modelling in real life and had, for an undisclosed sum, ceded his body to the university's anatomical museum so that, after his death, the collection would include his cadaver.<sup>30</sup> By contrast, the Mexican dwarves, exhibited in wax in Buenos Aires and travelling live throughout the world, were a famous case of ethno-anthropological falsification, cited many times in the work of scholars of that time.<sup>31</sup>

Like the dwarves, the hair-covered Julia Pastrana was from Mexico and had moved to Europe at a businessman's insistence. She spoke English and Spanish and had let herself be observed and exhibited all over Europe. The Baernoum catalogue assumed that the public knew her as she had danced in the ballets of Carlos Huiné and Ernst Renz.<sup>32</sup> Her story, including her death in Moscow during the birth of her son, had been told several times — she was, in effect, very well known as a live attraction and then as a travelling mummy, dressed as a Russian dancer and exploited in both cases by her husband, the owner of the Lent circus. Julia's prognathism and hairiness, when alive and dead, awoke the admiration of savants in Europe and the United States. However, the case of Señora Pastrana and her son (conserved in a sailor suit) were not very well known in Buenos Aires.

Julia's mummy demonstrates the interconnectedness between the naturalists, the continuous exploration of conservation methods and the creation of circus objects around the globe.<sup>33</sup> Far from Berlin and Paris, Julia and her also hair-covered son had been embalmed in Russia by the professor J. M. Sokoloff, who in 1860 gave a talk about the mummies of Pastrana and her son in the Moscow Naturalist Society, where they were also exhibited. Professor Sokoloff described Julia's anomalies but, primarily, he explained the process used to successfully embalm the cadavers so that they were able to be out in the open air for more than eight months, acquiring a new level of conservation against decomposition.<sup>34</sup> Sokoloff then presented various pieces of Egyptian mummies and two samples of mummies he had prepared eight years before, following the supposed ancient method. He also showed fragments of these embalmed bodies through a microscope, proving that except for the nerves, all of the elemental body tissues remained intact.

These Russian mummies, besides continuing to travel as they had in life, were also modelled and replicated as many times as there were potential clients. Mummies and casts crossed the oceans and were loaded onto boats, trains, and carts. They only stopped travelling when devoured by flames, left behind in a warehouse, or incorporated into a settled museum. The mummies, like the wax figures, were transformed into international merchandise, bringing together

different local marks that were erased or superimposed when the piece circulated through the variety shows and museums. In this sense, Julia Pastrana's head exhibited in Buenos Aires — one of many anatomical anomalies moving around the world at the time — was an object that indicated the intersections between local and international goods and fashions as well as the permeable barriers between past and present.

The wax heads in these museums rarely travelled alone. Whole bodies and body parts of children, teens, and women from other continents, accompanied the heads, some parts exhibited as examples of anatomy (an Asian boy of three years, a North American mestiza, and an African boy whose internal organs were visible from behind) and others as ethnographic specimens. An Argentine critic minimized the parts' importance, yet he dedicated various paragraphs to them, emphasizing that they lacked any great artistic value. There were full body figures, made ugly

by the bad taste that predominated in the way they were dressed and adorned, made unnatural by exaggerated make-up, and lacking vivacity and animation. It seems that the chill of death gravitates around them, much as a pretty dense layer of dust covers them. They are not those types of figures whose delicate execution delight the admirer and make him stop to contemplate their rosy cheeks, the vivid expression in their look, and the naturalness of the outfit and the mastery of the details.<sup>35</sup>

Far from living beings, the ethnographic waxes were closer to costume and clichés. However, these objects, which included the hands of a Chinese aristocrat, a Russian eardrum, and a bayaderka were inscribed like Julia Pastrana in a sort of cultural collage, where the fantasy of the costume outweighed any other element. This ethnographic aesthetic of nineteenth-century ballet and opera would be repeated in plazas, fairs, museums, and circuses.

The itineraries of travelling museums and their owners can help us understand the circulation of these objects not only at a spatial level but also in terms of crossing borders between fields. The travelling or itinerate anatomical museums functioned not only like circuses or fairs — they fed into each other and sometimes were either the offspring or the core of such entertainment enterprises. Henri Dessort's firm started as a circus, exhibiting characters such as a living 'Hercules' in Königsberg (1838) and Leipzig (1842). Early in the 1850s, his exhibition included a moving panorama, presented in Vienna and Hamburg (1852, 1855). Late in the 1850s, the museum took shape, being presented in the Galerie du Roi of the new Galleries Saint-Hubert in Brussels (1858), in Valencia and Barcelona (1858), and in the foyers of the theatres of Modena (1865, 1875, 1877). Open to both adult men and women, was displayed in the Regio Theater of Parma in 1875 and 1877, and in the carnival of 1864 and 1865. Furthermore, in 1865, the exposition awarded 200 to benefit infant asylums, charity institutions, and the Society for the instruction of men. In the Northern Italian provinces, they were part of the seasonal attractions, associated with the celebration of summer and carnival.

Brazil received the Dessort collection late in the 1890s to be exhibited in the foyers of the theatre in Sao Paulo in 1895 and 1897.<sup>36</sup> These museums did not always travel with their owners and creators. Museums such as the Dessort or the

Baenoum became a sort of ‘trade mark’ — impresarios from South America, Spain, and Italy imported and made the collections move far beyond the lives of the original founders. They circulated collections between different cities in Europe and the Americas that were often added to or subtracted from along the way. A mix of commercial, entertaining, medicinal, and educational, these travelling museums contributed to the diffusion and exchange of objects and pieces in different continents. Moreover, aesthetically situated somewhere between naturalism, the exoticism of a circus, and the sets of the nineteenth-century theatre, opera, and ballet, as we will see in the next section, they were adopted as advertisement for the charlatans of the late nineteenth century.

## The Bennati Museum

Around 1860, at the same time that the Dessort Museum opened in Modena and Parma, the commendatore and charlatan Guido Bennati (1827–98) arrived at the Empoli fair in Italy with his carriage and a group of men and women dressed as Negroes, Indians, and semi-nude ‘cannibals’ to sell his miracle cures.<sup>37</sup> A few years later, Bennati would arrive in South America, leaving behind several trials and accusations in Europe of the illegal practice of medicine and sale of secret remedies. A skilled surgeon and dentist, he was remembered in northern Italy for musical-medical shows in the markets, where he worked in association with doctors who signed his prescriptions and collaborated with him in curing in the plaza and in his private office.

In South America, Bennati continued his itinerant life, replacing the spectacle of the market with the museum of natural history; he also adopted the identity of a travelling naturalist, charged with evaluating the health and wealth of the regions he visited. Hired as an expert by different national and provincial governments and accepted in the literary and scientific circles of several Latin American cities, Bennati frequently moved around due to the recurring conflicts in which he was embroiled. Founder of the so-called Italian-Scientific-Medical-Surgical Commission, he travelled with his family, secretary, doctors, and an itinerant museum that gathered and lost pieces throughout the journey. His itinerary started in Buenos Aires about 1868 and moved through the Argentine provinces, Paraguay, and Bolivia, returning to Buenos Aires in 1883.<sup>38</sup>

In November 1876, the Italian Commission arrived in La Paz, Bolivia, after ‘having completed the studies of a scientific journey, relative to Hygiene, Climatology, Botany, Mineralogy, Geology, Zoology, Industry, and Commerce in the Argentine, Oriental, and Paraguayan Republics’.<sup>39</sup> Bennati introduced himself as a Professor of Chemical and Physical Sciences, protomedico of several Argentine Provinces, and member of diverse literary and scientific academies. The announcements in the press clarified: ‘from today, in this city, he will dedicate himself, through his medicine, and without prejudicing his other labors, to the study and cure of the diseases that afflict the human race in these regions and, more particularly, to those chronic and inveterate pains, which until now have rebelled against the curative methods and treatments used’.<sup>40</sup> Bennati and his Commission travelled not only

with a museum, but also with a set of scientific and surgical instruments, as well as a library with the literature and latest references on the countries they were visiting.

The medical procedure of this Commission was verified, according to its promoters, by the application of medicinal substances that it had discovered during their travels, which in many cases would permit surgery without blood loss or cutting instruments and with very rapid cures. Through these means, they took care of ‘skin diseases, secret illnesses, those of the bladder, fistula and glands in general, polyyps, ophthalmologic pains such as cataracts and glaucoma’.<sup>41</sup> In their salon, they cured for free, imploring parish priests and other authorities to send beggars with any pain to the Commission’s headquarters. People who wished to receive house calls would be visited by two Commission doctors, paying for each visit with an ounce of gold, a fee set by the Director so that the members did not get distracted from their scientific work. The museum and the medical office complemented each other: ‘the importance of the operations done by this Commission on its extended trips is proven by the pathological bodies that are found on display in its private rooms; also by the photographs of patients before the operation and after receiving the radical cure’.<sup>42</sup>

The Commission’s headquarters was in the upper floors of a house on the Plaza de Armas, La Paz’s main plaza. The Cabinet or medical office was inaugurated on Thursday, 7 November 1876, and remained open daily from 7–11 in the morning. The Museum opened every day from 1–4 p.m. The newspapers highlighted the museum’s collection of diverse American curiosities from the three kingdoms — animal, vegetable, and mineral — and some artificial: most notably, they said, the figure of a savage and two *chuncho* dresses.<sup>43</sup> They also cautioned that:

The school children arrive very early to Mister Bennati’s Museum. To avoid this distraction for the children, it would be convenient to prohibit their access. It is not prudent to have tolerance with the kids who go to the Museum to spend the time they should be dedicating to their studies and any other work that their parents and teachers should want them to do.<sup>44</sup>

Thus, the Museum was characterized as a mere distraction — the curiosities displayed, the natural history objects and the museum, pride of its owners, pertained to a universe from which children should be excluded. In this sense, it was similar to the popular anatomical museums, which travelled like the Commission’s, and which prohibited access of younger people due to the type of objects on display. The children, perhaps, would be delighted by the pathologies and photographs of the operations, but the distraction could also stem from the figures of Indians from the jungles, associated with the circus and travelling museum exhibitions.<sup>45</sup> The Commission museum was also, moreover, a means to gather objects. Bennati clarified:

As the Commission has been charged by some European museums to gather all of the curious and historical objects relative to South America, it has the honor of telling everyone that it will receive, justly compensating the owners, all of the rare plants, fruits, fossils, petrifications, furniture, books in the various languages of South America or in the Spanish of the Conquistadors’ time, animals, mineral pieces, and everything referring to the arts or three kingdoms of nature in these regions.<sup>46</sup>

In this way, the Bennati museum was an instrument of propaganda for the curative methods of the Commission but also for the very idea of what a museum represented. As an instrument for gathering new materials for other museums, it spread the requirements of contemporary scientific disciplines throughout the world. Moreover, Bennati and his secretary gave lectures and published in the Bolivian newspapers, reporting the results of their excavations in Tiwanaku. They propagated the idea of two ancient races as proved by the skulls found in the ruins and exposed in the museum, which — in addition to their own — was supported by the *École d'Anthropologie de Paris*. In such a way—even though they were impostors — the museum and the practices of Bennati & Co. were based on scientific literature and contributed to the expansion of anthropological and paleontological collections.<sup>47</sup>

In 1879, Bennati exhibited his collection in northwestern Argentina, in the city of Salta, in a private home. At that time, the collection was made up of human crania, *Mastodon*, *Megatherium*, and *Glyptodon* fossils, and ‘other species unknown to European savants’, objects collected on his excursions through Bolivia and Peru. The exhibition, placed on shelves in the different spaces he had rented, was open to the public for a modest price. The social chronicles of the exposition presented it as a museum that would interest ladies and gentlemen alike, as well as men of science and those curious about new things. Through the visit, ‘they would be able to perceive up close the surprising creations of God and works of man in remote times and extinct civilizations’.<sup>48</sup>

In Buenos Aires, the museum opened on January 16, 1883.<sup>49</sup> The archaeological, anthropological, paleontological, and natural history exposition contained rare and interesting objects, among them were minerals from the South American states, a plethora of vegetables that were of great importance for medicine, cleaning, and eating, animal skins, dissected animals, a large variety of reptiles conserved in wine, a live, domesticated lion that lived with a lamb, and tiny animal fossils. There were also ‘Objects of Incalculable Value’ — mummies, utensils, weapons, costumes, and musical instruments from indigenous races. The advertisement published in the press underscored that so large was the collections that an actual list of the multitude of objects would tire the readers. Each ticket cost ten pesos and every visitor received an explanatory catalogue.<sup>50</sup> The exhibition was known in the city as the ‘Bennati Museum’ or the ‘South American Scientific Museum’<sup>51</sup> (Figure 3).

An ‘embalmed Indian, with her adornments and dresses, belonging to the Potoreros tribe of Bolivia’ presided over the entrance to the vast salon, whose walls were covered with the collections that did not fit onto the numerous shelves.<sup>52</sup> To the right, behind a counter, two Bolivian Indian women acted as receptionists for the exposition. Among the anthropological objects displayed by Bennati, there were several complete mummies, one of which was said to be a ‘true museum of jewels and adornments, of which the magnificent necklaces made of lapis lazuli stand out’.<sup>53</sup> The seven mummies on display, six women and one man, had been taken from the Sierra del Peru, the Islas del Sol and de la Luna from Lake Titicaca, between the Sierra Illimani and Corocoro of Bolivia, in a cave 14,000 feet above sea level in the Sierra of Sajama, also in Bolivia.<sup>54</sup>

# MUSEO CIENTIFICO

SUD-AMERICANO

DE

ARQUEOLOGIA, ANTROPOLOGIA, PALEONTOLOGIA

Y EN GENERAL

DE TODO LO CONCERNIENTE

A

LOS TRES REINOS DE LA NATURALEZA

Por el Dr. D. GUIDO BENATTI

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Tipografía "LA FAMILIA ITALIANA. Reconquista, 240.

1883.

FIGURE 3 Catalogue of Bennati Museum.  
*Courtesy Biblioteca Nacional de la República Argentina*

The museum demonstrated a clear understanding of the sensibility and tastes of the urban public — museums and natural history dressed up with the exoticism of things from the past. Essentially, Bennati prepared new medicines that combined concoctions with known curative powers with American secrets this enhancing their efficacy; for example, this is how they advertised the operation for the ‘three great hemorrhoids, through our Incan paste’.<sup>55</sup> This ‘sovereign Incan cream’ was promoted as a paste found in their excavations in the Sajama and Tiwanaco caves, where they had also found the mummies and the skulls presented in his museum. Bennati said he had uncovered pieces of ancient land, filled with containers of a salve that was analysed and tested in Bolivian hospitals, curing external and skin diseases, wounds, scabies, leprosy, joint, tooth and arthritic pain. Bennati rubbed this cream until it was quite warm, covered the wound with a towel soaked in cold water and folded four times, which had to be changed regularly. The miracle cream — which he had been using since Italy — had been analysed in a trial in Lille, France, that showed that it was made of turpentine, rosin, and tallow.<sup>56</sup> Although Bennati claimed that the secret of the Incan cream was found in Pre-Colombian America, it actually was not. Bennati, in changing it into an Incan remedy, was merely disguising his medicine in the same way that he dressed his employees in the most exotic costumes he could find that reflected his present location.

I leave it to other works to analyse the relationship between the wardrobes of the wax models in anatomical museums, the medical-musical shows, the Incan receptionists at the Bennati museum and the opera and ballet. These museums were not only housed in the same spaces, they also shared an interest in mythical and exotic characters. The variety shows and the Baernoum or Bennati museums, characteristic of the nineteenth century, constituted, in this sense, a sort of travelling and commercial circus or museum, also linked to the culture of the charlatans. Moreover, these collections often ended up being incorporated into permanent natural science museums financed with public funds. The Bennati collection, for example, was going to be acquired in the 1890s by the La Plata Museum, established in 1884.<sup>57</sup>

In fact, an Argentine scientist had visited the museum while in Buenos Aires and praised its quite unique collections.<sup>58</sup> Located a few meters from the Public Museum of Buenos Aires and the political centre of the city, the museum was extensively reviewed by ‘La Patria Argentina’.<sup>59</sup> In his articles, the reporter examined the exhibited objects and repeated the information on the two primitive races found in Tiwanaku as presented by Bennati in his lectures published in Bolivian newspapers, highlighting the exceptional character of Bennati’s collections. Local state-run museums could not compete with the diversity and variety contained in the rooms of this itinerate museum. In fact, the presence of Bennati in Buenos Aires coincided with the debates on the nationalization of the museums located in the city, that is, the Public Museum, established in 1823 — and since the 1860s mostly devoted to fossil mammals — and the Anthropological Museum set up in 1878 in the upper floors of the Colon Theater. The Public Museum’s director had little interest, either in anthropology or in ethnography, but his museum was the more promising candidate to become the new national museum.<sup>60</sup> By tackling



FIGURE 4 'At Bennati's Museum. —This is the skull of Atahualpa when he was a child, and this is his skull when he was an adult'. Taken from *El Mosquito*, 15 April 1883, p. 3, Buenos Aires. Courtesy Biblioteca Nacional de la República Argentina

the uniqueness of Bennati's anthropological collections, the reporter wanted to emphasize how a private collector did more for the advancement of South American anthropology than the government with his lack of interest in these kinds of objects. To praise however, had the effect of Bennati — as the caricature published in Buenos Aires showed — applauding a charlatan talking nonsense (Figure 4).

## Conclusion

Travelling museums, like that of Baernoum or Bennati, have not yet been taken seriously. Abandoned as purely the 'folk medicine' of popular culture, they did not enter into the history of science.

The exaggerated and frenzied reception of the popular anatomical museums in the United States and England shaped the meaning that historians gave to this kind



of exhibition. Yet the cases of the travelling museums in Austria, Italy, Brazil, Prussia, and Argentina reveal something different with regard to the significance they had for the scientific culture of the late nineteenth century. Not only were women admitted, but these popular museums were also often the prelude to the establishment of academic collections and, in addition provided the material not only for new medical specialties but also for the natural history museum collections being formed in those same years.

For the historian, these facts pose several questions. How did the meaning of the objects (mostly shocking and titillating) from the popular museums change when they were incorporated into the permanent collections of a big museum of natural history? How did they shape the classification criteria of those objects? Once deposited in an academic institution, did the public recognize the objects previously exhibited as part of the paraphernalia of travelling charlatans? Did they lose that character? Did treating these curiosities as purely scientific reduce their notoriety? We venture they did not, but to answer those questions historiography on popular museums needs to escape the standards of shame and curiosity, between macabre and morbid, of the Victorian public.

Yet, this limitation ignores other features of the travelling museums that were valid, at least in the Latin world — their ties to charitable institutions and their temporary installation in downtown theatres. In the Italian and Belgian cities, as well as in Buenos Aires and La Paz, part of the revenues of these museums was offered to charitable works. They were not only located in good neighbourhoods, but reputable scientists visited them to study and observe what they circulated — either the images of the symptoms of syphilis, or ethnographic samples from regions unknown in the metropolitan centres. In that sense, a degree of legitimacy was associated with travelling museums, which represented an important space for hybridization of things and ideas, including the propagation of criteria to arrange the collections in the new modern museums.

Popular anatomical museums provide a good case to study the artisan side of medicine and science and the indispensable link in understanding the mediations between the material culture of natural history, art, and medicine. Each wax model from the popular anatomy museums condensed different cultural traditions and spheres. As such, they played an important role in the global circulation of facts connected with the so called culture of preservation, which — one can say — brought together objects and conservation techniques from different parts of the world. Thus, the body of a Mexican woman embalmed in Moscow by means of the experimentation of ancient techniques turned was exhibited in Buenos Aires as head done following the Italian procedures for modelling with wax. So the use of such objects could be and often was pure fancy but their origins might actually represent the culture of science in its broader sense.

Episodes such as the crossed itineraries of Julia Pastrana's mummy could be repeated indefinitely for every piece exhibited at the popular museums. Each one would serve to remind us of the complexity that overwhelms any attempt to reduce the past to just a single line of events.

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- <sup>15</sup> *Catálogo del Museo Científico Anatómico-Patológico de Baernoum* (Paris: Garnier, 1885); and *Catálogo del Museo Científico Anatómico-Patológico de Baernoum* (Buenos Aires: José Ruland, 1890), p. 361.
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