

Natural History Museums in Argentina, 1862–1906

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Natural history museums in Argentina during the last third of the nineteenth century have usually been regarded as pivotal institutions in the survey and exhibition of the national territory and, by extension, as disseminators of cohesive civic representations in the context of ‘nation building’. Departing from the idea of museums as material spaces in which scientific, concrete practices around collections take place, in this essay we propose a more nuanced picture that shows labile and changing ties between natural history museums and the state during the period. To this end, we consider the crafting of collections, exhibitions, policies of access and use developed at the Museo Público de la Provincia de Buenos Aires (later Museo Nacional de Buenos Aires) and the Museo General de La Plata.

KEYWORDS natural history museums, collections, exhibitions, Museo Nacional de Buenos Aires, Museo de La Plata, Argentina

Natural history museums during the last third of the nineteenth century in Argentina have been seen as national territory ‘representation machines’, ‘panoptic’ devices, or ‘exhibitionary complexes’ assembled to enlighten (and dominate) the people through a civic consciousness¹ shaped, in this case, by the display of a grandiose conception of Argentina’s national past.² Following the model developed by Benedict Anderson, these works understand museums as successful institutions of power, as instrumental parts of the classificatory grid developed by the state to produce homogeneous, cohesive images of a nation’s past through the creation of ‘ancestors’.³ In the case of Argentina, this approach has emphasized symbolic aspects of modes of classification generally inferred from the discursive matrices used by museum directors in their annual reports to governments, with a rhetoric imbued with nationalistic overtones and the promotion of civic values, in order to legitimize requests for financial resources. Furthermore, the uncritical use of such reports has consolidated the image of Argentina’s natural history museums as resulting exclusively from individuals generally presented as ‘founding fathers’, to the detriment

of the context and contingencies in which these museums were developed and the collective nature that underlay such enterprises.⁴ Consequently, aspects of the complex material dimensions of natural history museums in Argentina are often overlooked. In the last fifteen years, however, a body of historical work based on detailed empirical studies has shown a more nuanced picture. This work began with the idea that museums should be understood as material spaces in which contingent, collective practices around collections of objects take place.⁵ It has shown that, although almost all Argentinian museums of the time emerged from state provisions for the collection of data and objects from different territories, supposedly under national jurisdiction, the actual process for assembling their collections, their access, use, and exhibition reflect changing support received from national and provincial governments with consequent changes in institutional goals. Also, the emphasis put on collective networks that underlie the crafting of museum collections in Argentina has showed both a broad, diverse array of actors who inhabit different social worlds and other, less visible spaces in which natural history collections were used and displayed, such as itinerant or ‘travelling collections’,⁶ university and national colleges’ collections,⁷ provincial museums,⁸ national expositions,⁹ and portable cabinets for use in schools,¹⁰ among others.

In this essay we focus on two natural history museums, the Museo Público de Buenos Aires (since 1884, Museo Nacional de Buenos Aires) and the Museo de La Plata. Both institutions are commonly associated with Argentina’s emergence as a nation state during the last third of nineteenth century, a period usually characterized by strong public support for science and the concurrent creation of scientific institutions. From the crafting of its collections and exhibitions, its policies for access and use, and the institutional missions set by its directors, we describe a less linear process showing the changes economic and political contingencies caused in institutional goals over the period.

The Museo Público de Buenos Aires

On 31 December 1823, a museum and two physics and natural history collections were established in Buenos Aires under state protection. The Turin physician Pedro Carta Molino was appointed to lead them in 1824. He arrived in Buenos Aires in 1826 with his compatriot and assistant, the apothecary Carlos Ferraris. In the same year the collections were installed in the Convent of Santo Domingo in order to support the teaching of physical and natural sciences.¹¹ By 1827 the museum had a collection of 750 minerals acquired in France by Bernardino Rivadavia, as well as 800 insects, 150 birds, 180 shells, a deer and some fish. In 1830 the museum was transferred to the Faculty of Medicine, under the control of its rector and board. After Carta Molino’s departure, Ferraris remained in office until 1842, being replaced by Antonio Demarchi, a chemist and the first Swiss consul in Argentina, until 1854 when Santiago Torres took over the museum’s direction.¹²

A friends group, called the ‘Asociación de Amigos de la Historia Natural del Plata’, created for the museum’s promotion and preservation, was established that same year. Among its main goals was the encouragement of donations, mainly of

collections of ‘the three realms of nature’, including archaeological, historical, and numismatic series; and paying for their preparation with funds contributed by the association’s members. Its first secretary, Manuel Ricardo Trelles, stated in his reports that, although the Museo Público revolved around natural history, it brought together ‘all kinds of objects that may serve for the study of the sciences, literature and arts’.¹³ By encouraging donations, the museum became a repository for specimens representing South American natural history, and for objects from overseas as well. The museum was arranged around six sections, ‘Zoology’, ‘Botany’, ‘Mineralogy’, ‘Numismatics’, ‘Fine Arts’, and ‘Varia’. This latter included an Egyptian statue, mosaics from Pompeii and the Herculaneum, vessels from ancient Peru, and weapons and objects from the ‘savage people’ of the Americas, among others. These objects appear to have been insufficient or inappropriate to initiate a genuine ‘Archaeology’ section; this was also because of the relative absence of archaeological objects from Argentine territory. The ‘Zoology’ section doubled in those years, with new collections of birds from Brazil, insects, fishes, and an Egyptian mummy representing ‘man’ under ‘Mammals’. A collection of wood samples from Paraguay was the basis of the ‘Botany’ section and mineral samples from Uruguay, Brazil, Bolivia, Peru, Chile, Paraguay, and Chaco formed the ‘Mineralogy’ series. In those years the fossil collections were insufficient, though they were slightly increased with series of megatherium, milodon, mastodon, and glyptodon genera from all over the country. The ‘Numismatics’ section was the most active probably due to Trelles’ personal interest in that subject. He began to sort numismatic collections the museum had acquired during the 1820s which were comprised of about 2000 examples, mostly Greek and Roman.¹⁴

The ‘Asociación’ took over the management of the museum until 1862 and transferred it from the convent of Santo Domingo to four rooms at Universidad de Buenos Aires headquarters, on the corner of Peru and Alsina Streets.¹⁵ From 1862 onwards, the museum was directed by Hermann Burmeister (1810–1892), a German zoologist of the old systematic school and former professor at the University of Halle, where he helped establish its zoology museum.¹⁶ Burmeister had previously visited the museum in January 1857 during a field trip to Brazil, Uruguay, Argentina, and Chile, critically noting then the absence of examples of local fauna and flora, and especially fossil series that abounded around the city and all over Buenos Aires province.¹⁷ From an administrative point of view the Museo Público went from being managed by an association in 1854, to becoming dependent on the Universidad de Buenos Aires in December 1863 and, after a university amendment in 1865, it turned into an independent institution funded by the provincial government, with full autonomy.¹⁸ Thereafter, the museum, not the university, was the material base for Burmeister’s work and for establishing his scientific and social authority, not only in Buenos Aires but also around the world.¹⁹

Although he had previously worked on entomology, once in Argentina he focused mainly on palaeontology, through networks of assistants developed for the acquisition of fossils near the city of Buenos Aires, purchased from collectors or donated by correspondents in the hinterland.²⁰ In 1863 he also obtained a government decree to regulate fossil excavations giving priority to museum holdings. He set a new mission for the Museo Público favouring the creation of specific collections

sorted according to natural history classifications. This systematic organization of the museum's collections, in the manner of the French naturalist Georges Cuvier's (1769–1832) cabinet, required a complete and updated library on which Burmeister spent most of the funds obtained from the government and private individuals.²¹ The objective was to develop detailed catalogues of the fossil mammal bones discovered in the Pampas, known abroad through previously published works by naturalists such as Woodbine Parish (1796–1882), Charles Darwin (1809–1892), and Richard Owen (1804–1892), following a uniform nomenclature for international circulation. From a Parisian bookstore he ordered the expensive work *Osteographia* that consisted of four volumes of text and four *in folio* volumes with 323 plates by Ducrotay Marie Henride Blainville (1777–1850), and was published between 1839 and 1864. He used it extensively in his classifications of the pampas fossil fauna.²²

In 1866, from the ashes of Asociación de Amigos de la Historia Natural which had lost momentum as its members gradually lost interest, Burmeister created a new association, the Sociedad Paleontológica de Buenos Aires, directed by him with the aim to 'study and make known the fossils of Buenos Aires state' and to obtain additional resources to increase palaeontological collections and the library, and to continue publishing the *Anales del Museo Público* series.²³ This latter appeared in instalments of quite widely spaced frequency between 1864 and 1891. It was accompanied by other series, such as the *Actas de la Sociedad Paleontológica*, replaced after 1871 with the *Boletín del Museo Público*, where collections growth and library improvements were outlined. This series facilitated international publication exchanges with a network of institutions in South and Central America, Europe, and the US, essential to increasing the library's reference works.²⁴ During those years the museum had a regular office staff of six employees devoted to the collection and preparation of objects for study, and to library maintenance. Burmeister thus conceived of the museum as a scientific repository for specialists in the study of palaeontology and not as a centre for the public promotion of national natural history. Moreover, many members of the Sociedad Paleontológica, who were dedicated to palaeontology, had no access to the collections, nor were they able to publish in the *Anales*. In this sense, Burmeister can be seen as a nineteenth-century 'seeker', a naturalist who left his native country to seek new institutional spaces abroad that differed from those employing his European and North American colleagues. Once installed in Buenos Aires, Burmeister built a reputation based on research into specific, local palaeontological collections that was issued in the form of published catalogues circulated and discussed internationally.²⁵

In practice, the Museo Público was gradually perceived as a closed space, a collection for its director's exclusive use, solely to pursue his research interests, to the detriment of 'general public instruction', a practice that began to be criticized in the late 1870s. Although natural history collections were displayed with labels using scientific names, critics insisted on the need to accompany them with contextual descriptions, by using appropriate language to put them within reach of the non-specialist public.²⁶ Criticism also pointed to the overcrowded character of exhibits and the mixture of objects from various series, such as historical relics, archaeological items, and general 'curiosities'. Toward the beginning of the 1880s, in the context of intense negotiations between the national and the Buenos Aires provincial

governments over the location of the country's administrative capital, the authority of Burmeister and his museum began to be discussed by young natural history enthusiasts, such as Francisco P. Moreno (1852–1919), director of the Museo Antropológico y Arqueológico de Buenos Aires, and Florentino Ameghino (1854?–1911). They devised a plan for a great Museo Nacional in Buenos Aires city, to replace the one headed by the German zoologist, a project that in the end did not receive government support.²⁷ Finally, in 1884 the Museo Público under Burmeister was transformed into the Museo Nacional de Buenos Aires. The Museo General de la Provincia de Buenos Aires was created from scratch in the province's new capital city of La Plata, established 35 miles south.

The Museo General de La Plata

The Museo de La Plata was founded on 19 September 1884, by a decree of the government of Buenos Aires province. The decree was based on a proposal presented by Francisco Pascasio Moreno, the museum director mentioned above, who was born into a family devoted to trade, finance, and politics.²⁸ During the 1870s Moreno made a series of expeditions, with the support of his family and the provincial government, in the provinces of Buenos Aires, Entre Ríos, Santiago del Estero, and Catamarca, and also in Patagonia, in the regions of Río Negro, Chubut, and Santa Cruz. There he began his first collections of anthropological, archaeological, and natural history objects. Starting in 1877 these collections formed part of the Museo Antropológico y Arqueológico de Buenos Aires, supported with private and provincial funds, which operated in Moreno's household and, subsequently, in the halls of the Teatro Colón in Buenos Aires city. After the failed attempt to establish a major national museum, Moreno succeeded in convincing Dardo Rocha, governor of the province of Buenos Aires, and his successor Carlos D'Amico, to install these collections in the provincial capital. Unlike the museum led by Burmeister in Buenos Aires city, its provincial counterpart had a monumental building purpose-built specifically to fulfil this function.²⁹ The core collections of the Museo Antropológico y Arqueológico, which were moved to the new building, were insufficient for the new museum, which had a more general character encompassing not only anthropology and archaeology, but also geology, palaeontology, zoology, botany, history, and fine arts.

Inspired by museological ideas published by the British comparative anatomist William Henry Flower (1831–1899), best known in museum circles as director of the British Museum's natural history department, Moreno planned the formation of two types of collections: one designed for public display, and another to be used by specialists in various branches of natural history, anthropology, and archaeology.³⁰ Flower pointed to Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew as an example to follow, with collections for the use of scholars (herbaria scientifically classified) separate from those displayed to the public in the Museum of Economic Botany.³¹ We must emphasize here that Moreno had visited Kew Gardens and the collection directed by Flower. Moreno originally conceived a monumental main building, entirely dedicated to exhibitions, and an adjoining two-storey building where the

collections, study rooms, and a library would be housed for the exclusive use of specialists. This latter was not built due to recurrent budget cuts that authorities of the province began to carry out with more severity after 1890.

It is these financial problems that caused Moreno, in his reports to provincial authorities, to emphasize the museum's public utility and to utilize nationalistic rhetoric in his appeals. Moreno promoted the museum as a 'monument' where visitors could appreciate the greatness of the territory and the ancestors of the nation. Furthermore, Moreno used arguments very similar to those outlined by Sir Henry Cole (1808–1882), creator of the Crystal Palace exhibition and the Victoria and Albert Museum, and other British social reformers, as described by Bennett.³² According to Moreno, the Museum of La Plata's huge exhibition rooms would serve a 'civilizing mission' by bringing Argentinean citizens to the world of science and taking them 'away from the tavern'.³³ But, despite these promises of civic utility, the formation and nature of its collections and exhibitions and the recurring changes in institutional strategies and objectives gave rise to a less significant contribution to 'nation-building'. In practice, the collections and exhibitions represented a vast region that transcended national borders, extending to South America and other countries in the southern hemisphere. In order to fill the museum's numerous, huge empty halls in those years various strategies were implemented. Private donations were encouraged, expeditions to different parts of the provincial territory were conducted, and collections were purchased in the country and abroad from private collectors and 'travelling naturalists' who sold to the highest bidder.

An analysis of these strategies allows us to broadly identify two main stages.³⁴ During the first, extending from 1884 to 1892, the museum was conceived as both a centre for studying 'South American nature' and as a space that would contribute to the general education of the inhabitants of the province of Buenos Aires in line with other public educational institutions such as schools, colleges, and libraries. With regard to the latter, Moreno hoped to complement primary and secondary education in the province. He planned to accomplish this with a series of lectures and practical projects on the 'physical and moral history of Argentine territory' based on the museum's collections and photographs. This would be facilitated with the installation of an exclusively 'provincial section' where the visitors could appreciate their own natural resources involved in the province's progress through geographical, topographical, and climatic charts, and displays of herbaria, soil samples, geological sections, and special zoological collections. The plan also included the manufacture of portable 'cabinets' with natural history samples representative of the province for use in schools, but they were never produced.³⁵ Most of the other educational objectives did not materialize in practice, and only some public lectures were given in 1896.

During the period from the founding of the museum to its opening to the public in 1888, its various sections were created in a context marked by the contingencies of available collections and the approval of building construction funds by the government. The first, embryonic sections were those of 'Geology', 'Pampas Palaeontology', 'Current Zoology', 'Comparative Anatomy', and 'Human Culture'. Collection development was largely undertaken through purchases from other regions of South America. Examples include Peruvian vessels acquired from

Chilean military official Aristides Martínez, and artefacts of prehistoric peoples from Uruguay, purchased from the collector José Henriques Figueira. Palaeontological collections from Bolivia were acquired from Italian commander Guido Benatti³⁶ and comparable collections from France were purchased from palaeontologist Florentino Ameghino. Skull series of the Guanches Indians of the Canary Island were acquired from Spanish collectors Gabriel Garachico and Víctor Grau Bassas, and two Egyptian mummies were donated by governor Rocha. Collections of minerals and bird skins from Chile and ethnographic series from Paraguay, Ecuador, and Brazil were also obtained. Moreno also prioritized exchanges with other natural history museums in the southern hemisphere, in particular those of South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand.³⁷

Beginning in 1888, another strategy for collection acquisitions emerged through a set of expeditions directed from the museum by Moreno. Those voyages focused on three main regions: the hinterland of the province of Buenos Aires, the valleys of the north-west provinces, and Patagonia. Moreno hired ‘traveling naturalists’ and taxidermists to conduct the expeditions in accordance with his carefully written instructions. The main purpose of these expeditions was the collection of geological, palaeontological, anthropological, and zoological specimens for display and study, and assembling sets of duplicates for exchange with other museums.³⁸ The travellers played an active role in establishing a network of correspondents who donated objects to the museum, communicated new findings and supported the field staff by providing food, transportation, housing, and package shipping, and despatching correspondence from within the country. Building such networks took place in a context of rapid expansion of transport and communication technologies that linked the coastal cities with the hinterland.³⁹ Although the enhanced understanding of Argentina’s natural resources acquired through expeditions and collecting has been attributed to the initiative of the national government, it was primarily due to the personal bonds, knowledge, and initiative of these traveling naturalists.⁴⁰

Drastic budget cuts for the Museum and the political instability of the province leading up to 1892 mark the beginning of the second stage which extends between then and 1902. In 1892 the Museo de La Plata became a centre for conducting national surveys with financial support from the Argentinian Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores (Ministry of Foreign Affairs). Moreno offered the Museum’s services to the latter in order to raise additional funds to restore normal museum functions terminated by provincial cutbacks. The surveys had the dual purpose of identifying exploitable natural resources and contributing to the topographic mapping of the Andean region to ascertain the boundaries between Argentina and Chile from the province of Jujuy in the north to Tierra del Fuego in the south. Thus, a National Explorations Section was created with topographers hired in the country and from abroad. This new objective was further strengthened with the official appointment of Moreno as an ‘Expert’ in service of the state in its boundary dispute with Chile in 1896.

This linkage between the institution and the border issue exemplifies Benedict Anderson’s assertion of the powerful ‘warp’ made of ‘museums, censuses and maps’. It could be argued that the Museo de La Plata thus played an instrumental

role in the definition of Argentinean nationality. But, contrary to what is commonly thought, this new institutional orientation curtailed the museum's commitment to the study and exploration of the country. Indeed, it halted work on territorial description for the 1895 National Census and the identification of exploitable natural resources being done by the National Explorations Section. The staff previously assigned to these tasks was reassigned to the new Office of Limits to chart the boundaries between Argentina and Chile. In another vein, during the seven years of conflict with Chile (1895–1902), Moreno was absent travelling in the field or abroad, generally to Europe to arrange international treaties. During this period, Rafael Cattani, a Swiss clerk, acted as *de facto* director with increasing autonomy, taking decisions related to hiring and firing personnel, and the management of collections and expeditions. This situation caused constant conflicts between different employees, profoundly altering the development of the work on collections and exhibitions. On the other hand, the absence of a centralized, coordinated master plan among the various museum sections allowed their heads the independence to pursue the work they considered most appropriate.

The Museo de La Plata and Museo Público as Exhibition Centres

The changes in Museo de La Plata's institutional mission during the period were also reflected in the development and use of its collections. Although in the original plan Moreno conceived of forming two types of collections, one for display and public instruction and the other for research and specialists' investigations, in fact the first predominated. It was noted critically at the time that the large amount of money spent on the building and explorations would have maintained a smaller museum with a staff of specialists working in the scientific study of collections.⁴¹ The museum was perceived as a 'useless grave' where objects lay devoid of contextual information that would make the museum useful to science. This is also related to the lack of specialized personnel for the study and classification of collections. Indeed, during the first stage, despite the initial emphasis placed on obtaining palaeontological and anthropological collections, those responsible for them did not work at the museum for long.⁴² In 1895 five 'Sections' were created: Geology, Palaeontology, Anthropology, Zoology, and Botany, headed by Rudolf Hauthal (1854–1928), Santiago Roth (1850–1924), Herman F. C. ten Kate (1858–1931), Fernando Lahille (1861–1940), and Nicolai Alboff (1866–1897), respectively. Museum regulations stipulated that they should compile inventories and catalogues, make explorations, publish papers in the Museum's journals, and assemble exhibitions.⁴³ But in practice, in the context of the border dispute with Chile, the national surveys consumed all the material and human resources to the detriment of museum work and collections studies.⁴⁴ This also affected the frequency of publications and the acquisition of current scientific literature and, as employees stayed in the field for long periods, their absences also postponed work on the inventory, cataloguing and preparation of objects for display.⁴⁵ Despite orders given by Moreno, only a few catalogues were published on small collections with well-known provenance, and only towards 1900.⁴⁶

These initial incipient and fragmentary efforts at sorting and organizing collections signal the end of the ‘General Museum’ devised by Moreno in 1884. In practice, he prioritized the assembly of exhibitions and inaugurated a new organizational stage which would continue when the institution was absorbed by the National University of La Plata founded in 1906.⁴⁷ But as a result of the ‘collection fever’ encouraged by Moreno’s instructions to his fieldworkers in the 1890s (‘everything is useful for the museum’), lots of wooden boxes of specimens without documentation began to accumulate in the Museum’s storage rooms, stairways, and corridors. Many of these collections were arranged and catalogued only towards the mid-1910s,⁴⁸ and others remain unidentified to date. Finally, the Museum’s focus on border-related studies in effect curtailed two projects that were presented to Moreno by Juan Bautista Ambrosetti and Guido Boggiani in 1893 and 1897 respectively. One was to increase, classify, and study ethnographic collections representative of indigenous groups of Argentine territory; and the other was to create a specific ethnographic section staffed by specialists. Some studies stated that the Museo de La Plata was the main centre for promoting anthropology in Argentina in the context of nineteenth-century nation building.⁴⁹ According to that scenario, its main objective would have been to reveal the native peoples of Argentina as the ‘ancestors’ of its national identity. This ‘ancestry’, inferred from Moreno’s reports to provincial authorities, was supposedly aimed at cementing feelings of national belonging among the Argentinean people. Contrary to the image conveyed in Moreno’s reports, however, in practice the anthropology section and its collections were not well supported and were ultimately displaced by the palaeontological section.⁵⁰

To sum up, the ways in which the Museo de La Plata’s collections and exhibitions were affected by institutional commitments to the boundary question shows that a process supposedly coordinated by the state for educating its inhabitants was actually fragmented and contradictory. For these reasons, Moreno’s claims of museum visitors of 50,000 per annum in annual reports of the 1890s are probably overstated. That figure is close to the number of visitors the museum received annually during the first decade of the twentieth century, with more days open to the public and systematically organized visits by school groups.⁵¹

Returning to the Museo Público (renamed Museo Nacional de Buenos Aires in 1884), in pursuing the objectives and priorities established by Burmeister during the thirty years of his term, the institution faced a structural problem: the lack of adequate space for developing exhibitions. Carlos Berg (1843–1902), former director of the Museo Nacional de Montevideo, Uruguay,⁵² succeeded Burmeister after the latter’s death in 1892. Unlike Burmeister, Berg had previous pedagogical experience in Argentina. Since 1876 he had served as Professor of Natural History at the National College of Buenos Aires, where he worked on the installation of its collections. For his college courses Berg had also drafted two manuals specially formulated with examples of local nature.⁵³ For that reason he was particularly concerned about linking the Museo Nacional with educational institutions in the city. Berg thus focused on improving its public displays in harmony with the development of museum research in zoology (fishes and reptiles) and entomology. He repeatedly complained, unsuccessfully, to government authorities about the lack of a suitable building for work on the collection’s study and exhibition, and

worthy of a national museum. Nonetheless, in the following years, Berg reformed the museum by opening new galleries, improving access with a new staircase, adopting a new lighting system, and setting modern standards of hygiene and general security for visitors. He also improved palaeontological specimen displays, such as that of a megatherium skeleton, by removing a display case that covered it. Berg acquired new collections of butterflies from Africa, Asia, and Oceania from the Tring Museum, Hertfordshire, and models of marine animals from Naples' zoological station.⁵⁴ In spite of these efforts, the limited space did not allow him to display large objects and collections which remained packed in storage for years, such as numerous whale skeletons that in many other natural history museums of the time were displayed hanging from the ceiling.⁵⁵ This absence of enough space for exhibitions was not finally solved until almost the 1930s, with the move to a monumental new building, where collections that had remained in storage since the 1860s could be unpacked.⁵⁶

Conclusion

To consider the natural history museums in Argentina exclusively from the perspective of nation-state support and their supposed national significance at the time, inferred exclusively from their directors' reports to government authorities, obscures aspects of the historical process of which they were part. Emphasis on the national character of these institutions overlooks their focus on 'South American' natural history, their eclectic collections and displays, the changing support of successive governments, the lack of proper space for public displays, policies of restricted access to collections, and, above all, the non-existence of a centralized master plan coordinated and supported by the government during this period. First, in the case of the Museo Público, we pointed out the important role played by civil associations in promoting this institution by providing extra funds for its operation. Second, we considered the museum's mission between 1861 and 1892, as redefined by Burmeister, whereby palaeontological collections were prioritized and the museum was conceived as a centre for the study of fossil collections by scientific specialists at the expense of public instruction. The museum was eventually perceived as a private space for the exclusive use of its director and as a one-man scientific enterprise for his own international prestige. His successor's efforts to improve exhibitions were hindered by insufficient space at the Museo Nacional to fulfil its functions of research and public display.

In this respect, the Museo de La Plata was the opposite of its national counterpart because it had a monumental building since its inception, even if it lacked enough collections to fill it. The original plan devised by Moreno, to establish the museum as an exhibition centre of the natural wealth of the Argentine territory and its 'physical and moral history' in order to instruct the inhabitants of the province of Buenos Aires, remained on the drawing board. Many of Moreno's initiatives appear to have been displaced by the museum's assignment to the boundary question with Chile between 1895 and 1902. The complex and sometimes contradictory statements and activities of the Museo de La Plata's director comprise an

institutional image that resembles a device or *dispositif* in the service of the state, a sort of Latourian ‘centre of calculation’.⁵⁷ But an approach less attentive to rhetoric and more focused on the history of the museum provides a more nuanced picture. Most of the museum’s expeditions were in fact developed in the field from staff’s previous personal ties with local inhabitants, and not through the bureaucratic or administrative structure of the nation state. All the documentary information produced by the Boundary Commissions —such as correspondence, circulars, instructions, field journals, maps, photographs, and topographic records— were processed and stored not in the museum but at Argentinean Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores.⁵⁸ On the other hand, the resulting collections of specimens were accumulated in storerooms or crowded in halls without being processed or recorded in any way that would allow them to be accessed efficiently for displays or scientific studies. At the time this situation led to harsh criticism, the museum being considered as an ‘ossuary of murdered evidence’.⁵⁹

The lack of sustained government support for these institutions, and the changing objectives devised by their directors to adapt to adverse conditions, compel us to be more cautious about the usually assumed link between Argentina’s museums of natural history and the emergence of the Argentinean nation-state.

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