

Curious Objects at the University Library¹

Curious Objects – an exhibition of ‘some unusual and unexpected items’ from the University Library’s collection runs from 3 Nov 2016 - 31 March 2017 at the Milstein Exhibition Centre, Cambridge University Library, West Road, Cambridge CB3 9DR. Free entry.

Curious Objects is an intriguing selection of objects and documents, which help tell the story of the University Library’s history and development. Pride of place right at the beginning of the exhibition is a drawer of fossils from Dr John Woodward’s (1667-1728) *Cabinets of Curiosities*, which now form the core of the Sedgwick Museum’s fossil collection but was originally held by the University Library from 1728 until 1735.

When Woodward’s bequest to the University arrived there was no museum to house it but the custodian of the collection – the first Woodwardian Professor of Geology was the Reverend Conyers Middleton (1683-1750), who also happened to be the University’s Principal librarian. Not surprisingly the Woodwardian cabinets joined the Reverend George Lewis’s cabinet and all the other *Curious Objects* already held by the library.

Although the *Curious Objects* display contains just a single drawer of Woodward’s collection of some 10,000 specimens, its choice is particularly apt for this exhibition. Like a Russian doll, what we see is just part of another even older collection of fossils, which Woodward, a supreme ‘magpie’ collector, bought from the estate of Agostino Scilla (1629-1700).

Scilla was a well known and very accomplished Sicilian painter and expert naturalist who was fascinated by fossils and the problem of their origin, which was a hot topic in the 17th century. Scilla used his artistic skills to draw his fossil specimens and compare some of them to equivalent living creatures. He had no doubt that fossils were the remains of once living creatures and in 1670 he produced a beautifully illustrated book ‘*La Vana Speculazione Disingannata Dal Senso*’ to prove his thesis – one which Woodward himself supported.

The *Curious Objects* display demonstrates the almost unique nature of the Sedgwick Museum’s Scilla material. Not only are the original specimens preserved, along with a copy of Scilla’s book and published illustrations but also Scilla’s original graphite drawings. From these the viewer can only wonder at Scilla’s skill as an artist. He observed and drew what he saw, even when he probably did not fully understand the biological and palaeontological significance of what he was seeing. The published engravings are as expert as the drawings. Their value as documents in the debate about the nature of fossils, was so great that some of them were reproduced in the Transactions of the Royal Society and helped persuade English-speaking naturalists of the organic nature of fossils.

¹ Published November 2016 © Department of Earth Sciences

Other objects from other collections and museums are also on display in this fascinating exhibition.

Douglas Palmer, Sedgwick Museum

