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# Paraobjects: Writing History through the Margins of Natural History Heritage

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Nuclear Research Center, I contend that these seemingly inconspicuous pieces of paper provide a unique lens through which the Greek authorities communicated their scientific achievements. Within the subtle imagery and symbolism, one discerns the Greeks' pride in nuclear advancements, their entry into the International Atomic Energy Agency, and the aspirations of Greek scientists to rekindle national scientific prowess and revive the echoes of ancient glory. The Science Communication prism, thus, refracts insights into the nuanced ways in which scientific achievements are portrayed and perceived through the unassuming yet powerful medium of postage stamps.

### **9 Paraobjects: Writing History through the Margins of Natural History Heritage**

Room: 40.109.

Organiser: José Beltrán, CNRS, France; Nathalie Richard, Le Mans Université, France

Chair: José Ramón Marcaida, CSIC, Spain

Historians of science have perhaps never paid as much attention to objects and to the materiality of knowledge as they do nowadays. And yet artefacts often still remain elusive historical sources. This is particularly true for natural historical heritage. What can we do, as historians, with a stuffed chimpanzee, a dried fern, a pickled fish, or a fossil bone? What can we do with century-old specimens when they are preserved for their value to today's natural sciences at the expense of their historicity? How can historians even find their way in the institutions that care for natural historical heritage in cases in which these are not designed primarily to be historical repositories? One way to address these questions is through "paraobjects". With this neologism, we designate what surrounds museum artefacts: boxes and flasks, labels and wrapping material, display cabinets and bases... Like paratexts to texts, paraobjects also shape the ways we use, preserve, and understand specimens—just as they did in the past. They offer, in other words, a key point of entry for historians to interrogate the social, cultural, economic, and political lives of specimens.

This panel is the third public installment of the project "Paraobjects: Natural Historical Heritage through the Margins," launched in the framework of the MSCA project SCRIBSCIE ("Scribal Science: Naturalists' Paper Empire in France, ca. 1660-1770,"

2019–2022). In collaboration with the RISE project SciCoMove (“Scientific Collections on the Move: Provincial Museums, Archives, and Collecting Practices (1850–1950),” 2021–2025), it brings together historians who deal with paraobjects as historical sources and reflect on the possibilities and the challenges that natural historical heritage presents to the writing of history.

### **Peripheral Heritage as Historical Sources in Natural History Museums: Introductory Notes**

- José Beltrán, CNRS

**Abstract:** The aim of this presentation is to offer an overview of the main possibilities and challenges that “paraobjects” offer to historians as a way to better understand and value specimens’ historicity. From a historiographical, a methodological, and an institutional point of view, the time is ripe to do so. Debates about restitution currently urge historians of collections to tell more complex, less triumphalist stories of the heritage in Western museums. Provenance research or the history of the book and of information have recently reminded us that there are ways to do so through non-narrative sources, which sometimes help us circumvent the biases of more traditional documentation. Digitization and the lack of storage space force curators to think fast and hard about what is lost when collections are revamped. For historians, time is pressing, as a matter of fact. Past paraobjects are essential traces of past knowledge practices, sometimes the only ones to reconstruct the lives of a specimen. Yet they remain often neglected as curious without scientific value or accessories to be replaced by more efficient conservation devices. Worse yet: since paraobjects are rarely accessioned in natural history museums (as in many other sort of museums, for that matter), they lie in a dangerously ambiguous legal and patrimonial status. It is, we believe, through historical research that we can highlight not only the value of paraobjects as sources but also of specimens’ historical dimension.

### **Tied with Wire: The Stability of the Temporary in the Case of Pedro de Angeli’s Fossil Mammal Collections, Buenos Aires in the 1840s**

- Irina Podgorny, CONICET and Universidad Nacional de La Plata

**Abstract:** In this paper I will present the results of my research on the collections of South American fossil mammals that were sold or donated to different European

museums in the 1830s and 1840s. Some of these pieces integrate the skeletons that are still exhibited today in London, Berlin or Paris. Others, however, remain in their boxes in the state in which they were sent, revealing the ways in which they were prepared and packaged, an aspect that complements the information provided in the letters written in the context of these transactions.

### **“CL”. About a Tag and Specimens on the Move**

- Nathalie Richard, Le Mans Université

**Abstract:** In many collections of prehistoric artefacts around the world, from Mexico City to Buenos Aires, from Paris to Barcelona and Neuchâtel, specimens carry a similar tag. In this communication, I argue that this tag fits well the definition of a "paraobject" put forward by José Beltrán. The "CL" tag is an object which is distinct from the specimen but comes with it. It gives information that is not given by the specimen itself, especially on its history and past moves. Based on research in the collections and archive of different institutions in Latin America and Europe, this paper will first explain what the capital letters "CL" stand for. It will analyse the specific scientific background that justified the travels of specimens carrying such a tag from France to many institutions abroad, as well as the various social and material contexts in which these travels took place. In accordance with one of the main research hypotheses in the EU project SciCoMove, my paper will exemplify that the circulation of scientific specimens was not a one-way process from non-Western “exotic” countries to the Western museums, but that collections also travelled the other way round.

### **10 Replicate, Renew or Innovate? Historiographical Foundations and Methodological Reflexivity for the History of Science (2/2)**

Room: 40.008.

Organiser: Lluís Coromina Verdaguer, Universitat de Girona; Anxo Vidal Nogueira, Universitat de València

Chair: Lluís Coromina Verdaguer, Universitat de Girona

Commentator: Julen Ibarburu Antón, University of Granada

In this panel, we reunite researchers to reflect on the production of historical knowledge and the potentials and limitations of the approaches and methods currently