## Endless Forms

The MIT Faculty has made this article openly available. **Please share** how this access benefits you. Your story matters.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>As Published</td>
<td><a href="http://dx.doi.org/10.1126/science.1172248">http://dx.doi.org/10.1126/science.1172248</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Publisher</td>
<td>American Association for the Advancement of Science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Version</td>
<td>Original manuscript</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accessed</td>
<td>Sat Jun 17 02:39:18 EDT 2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Citable Link</td>
<td><a href="http://hdl.handle.net/1721.1/50239">http://hdl.handle.net/1721.1/50239</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terms of Use</td>
<td>Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Detailed Terms</td>
<td><a href="http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/">http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
“Endless Forms: Charles Darwin, Natural Science and the Visual Arts”
Exhibition at the Yale Center for British Art, February 12-May 3, 2009


Darwin did not come up with his theory of evolution by natural selection in a “Eureka!” moment. As biographers have shown, he arrived at his big idea gradually after his five-year voyage on the Beagle, and he nurtured and refined it for longer still before exposing it to public scrutiny. As historians of science have shown, evolutionary theories had been current since before Darwin was born, propounded for both specialist and non-specialist audiences.

“Endless Forms: Charles Darwin, Natural Science and the Visual Arts,” the fascinating and spectacular exhibit on display at the Yale Center for British Art (and to be on display, with a somewhat different array of objects, at the Fitzwilliam Museum of Cambridge University in the summer), presents an additional context for Darwin’s work. Darwin’s world was saturated in images, and the exhibit compellingly illustrates the interplay between his ideas and the visual culture of his time. Although the opening room is dominated by Darwin the man, the exhibition as a whole is not structured around his life or his career. Even the introductory display juxtaposes popular images, including a statue of a gorilla abducting a nearly naked woman, a photograph of a man with skeletons and skulls of various primates, and a fanciful print of apes regarding the first human child, with the iconic portrait of the aged Darwin in a cloak, a famous quotation from On the Origin of Species (“there is grandeur in this view of life…”), and two images that Darwin produced himself, an early sketch of his branching evolutionary tree and the diagram that ultimately
appeared in the Origin. (Unlike many naturalists of his time, Darwin was not a gifted artist.)

The exhibition as a whole is structured thematically, with sections devoted to the importance of visual evidence for natural history, the history of the earth, the struggle for existence, the relationship of people to other animals, the relationship of people to other people, sexual selection, and the way that some late nineteenth-century artists used ideas associated with Darwin. This organization offers several important rewards. Each section includes items that span at least the entire nineteenth century—that is, a longer period than that of Darwin’s career or, indeed, his life. Each includes items that represent the variety of forms in which the themes could be represented. Particularly arresting are the mixture of two-dimensional displays (paintings, prints, photographs, drawings, maps, book or journal illustrations, broadsides) with three-dimensional displays (statues, rocks, zoological and botanical specimens, scientific instruments, and several astonishing taxidermical tours de force), the mixture of the imaginative (Edwin Landseer’s anthropomorphic dog paintings or mythologized impressions of the emergence of humankind) with the naturalistic (a collection of insects or of photographs of human types). Many of the sections are connected by the increasing prominence of photography, with its ostensible promise of faithfulness to life.

For example, the understanding of the dynamism and length of geological history was an essential component of Darwin’s evolutionary thought. “Endless Forms” illustrates the appeal that these emergent notions had to artists and amateurs, as well as to serious naturalists. Painters like J. M.W. Turner and Thomas Cole produced visions of the ancient (sometimes very ancient) world, while others incorporated new geological ideas in their images of such sublime settings as Niagara.
Falls. Naturalists exercised their imaginations on the extinct ancient inhabitants of the
earth, drawing the creatures and casting them in statues, of which the exhibit includes
only some designs, rather than the enormous end products. Not content to admire such
representations, the public began to collect its own smaller fossils along the beach
cliffs, and this activity also became the subject of artists.

The exhibit is very full and very well selected. It contains many wonderful
things. Perhaps the most wonderful (not least because of the effort and skill that must
have been required to transport it intact from England) is a diorama, if that is the right
word for a construction that can be viewed from all sides. Entitled “Struggle with the
Quarry,” it shows a heron which, having caught an eel, is itself caught by a falcon
controlled by a human falconer. (The falconer is only suggested; the other
participants in the dramatic scene are stuffed.) The “Struggle for Existence” section
contains diverse representations of animals’ struggles with each other, either as
predator and prey, or as rivals. It also includes a few images that suggest the
application of this idea to the members of Darwin’s own society. Similarly close to
home, the section on the “Descent of Humankind” juxtaposes predictably exoticized
photographs of dark-skinned people from remote locations with an album of
photographs of various British types.

To accompany the exhibition, Diana Donald and Jane Munro have edited a
lavishly produced collection of essays. Most of the contributors are art historians or
museum curators. It reproduces many of the items displayed in “Endless Forms”
(along with many additional images), but it is much more than a catalogue. It offers
thoughtful exploration of many of the ideas provocatively raised by the displays
themselves. And anyone who visits “Endless Forms”—no matter how well
acquainted in advance with Darwin’s work or with his society or with his subject--will come away with many new answers and many new questions.