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text: Jan Dolák, photo: Jan Cága, The Moravian Museum

Messel on Tour – Natural Catastrophe after the Extinction of the Dinosaurs

From January 6th to April 7th, an exhibition entitled *Messel on Tour – Natural Catastrophe after the Extinction of the Dinosaurs* was staged at the Moravian Regional Museum, Brno. The exhibition was set up by the Hessisches Landesmuseum, Darmstadt, which is also the owner of the exhibits, and has been visited by over half a million visitors in a number of European museums (Basel, Oslo, Leiden, Kassel, etc.). Visitors to the metropolis of Moravia, Brno, had the opportunity to view the exhibition thanks to long-term cooperation of the Darmstadt's museum and the Department of Paleontology of the Moravian Regional Museum.

The German site Messel is known for large-scale extraction of bituminous argillite which began in the mid- 19th century and ended in the 1970's.

A large number of tertiary marine fossils, from the period dating back to approximately 47 million years, were found at the site during extraction. Specimen of the early stages of the evolution of mammals (predecessors of the horse, bats, opossums, lemuroid mammals, rodents and primitive anteaters) as well of as birds, crocodiles, snakes, frogs and insects were found there. The site became famous for the discovery of a fossil of one of the first primates, *Darwinius masillae*. The Messel site is often figuratively called "the paleontological Pompey" and is on the UNESCO world heritage list.

The entrance venue of the Brno installation contained well chosen tactile elements (two plastic dummies of fish the visitors could touch and stroke) and interesting worksheets and

games (Pexeso, a tertiary mammal kit, etc.) for visiting school children. These collateral activities were very well prepared and also included a very much appreciated project done in cooperation with the Brno ZOO and designed to encourage visitors to compare tertiary animals with animals existing today.

The starting point of the display itself was a long corridor with panels with explanatory texts on the geological and zoological context of the Tertiary. Visitors who wished to get more information on the topic could use a computer installed for that purpose. Having visited this part, visitors could proceed to subsequent rooms with 125 exhibits on display. The unique nature of the exhibits must have been apparent to all visitors, whether or not they had specific knowledge in the field and despite the fact that paleontological finds tend to be viewed as something not so attractive on its own. Most people certainly appreciate that finding a fossil of a turtle, a mammal or a bird is something that does not happen every day. The layout of the exhibits corresponded to their probable incidence in the environment of an Eocene lake, i.e. a "primary forest", a "shoal", etc.

Sound effects (the buzz of insects, birds' voices) evoking a tropical forest underscored the





desirable ambience. In order to accentuate the atmosphere of a virgin forest, the venues were only dimly lighted. The price for that, however, was an overall decrease in visibility inside the rooms. Reducing the illumination to the minimum created an obstacle, even though still tolerable, to viewing the exhibits. Luckily, there were not many texts, and those included were placed too low to be legible. Even simple labels in Czech and English were extremely difficult to read. Information on certain selected items was available through an Apple iPod touch screen and the "QR codes". Visitors who did not have the device could, on extremely strict terms, borrow a "smart phone". This brings us to the critical point. Even though there is a whole generation of people who use mobile phones on a daily basis or even develop a sort of dependence on them, there is still a huge number of people who do not want or even are not able use the iPod. I believe that the use of this technology is welcome where it is complementary to standard means of communication using texts, and where the visitors can choose the way to get information. In the above-mentioned case, however, visitors had no other option, which is limiting in my view. iPods allowed for reading the texts for the exhibits on a relatively small display (very tiring for the eyes) or listening to the texts, which was the option many visitors certainly preferred. As a result, visitors were obliged to find the number of the exhibit of their choice in the dimly lighted room to eventually locate the same number on the mobile phone and play the text, which is a weak point of the presentation. It would not certainly be a problem to provide a graphic marking for the exhibits accompanied by spoken text in the mobile phones to make orientation of the visitors easier. Nevertheless, the above drawbacks were counterbalanced by the scenic aspects of the installation. The ambience

of virgin forest (sounds and projections) gave a basically simple, non-interactive display of exhibits a much more broad and plastic, and partially contextual dimension. Some minor shortcomings were also present in the original German design of the installation, such as the use of exact inventory numbers for each exhibit, which is quite a superfluous piece of information for visitors. Czech organizers, for

their turn, failed to provide for the translation of the German word "Fledermause", probably used in one of the previous installations, into English. In spite of the above shortcomings, the exhibition can be considered a successful and an exceptional project. The creators of the exhibition managed to create an extremely interesting presentation of a visually demanding topic – the life in the Tertiary. ■

