

The American Philosophical Society: Shaping Knowledge and New Audiences

By Jessie McCulley, with thanks to Brian Gregory and Sue Ann Prince

When Benjamin Franklin founded The American Philosophical Society (APS) in 1743 he charged it with the mission to “promote useful knowledge to the benefit of mankind”. In the early years of the Republic, counting many of the nation’s founders as members, the Society functioned as a national library, museum and academy of science. APS continued to fulfill its mission in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by supporting research grants, a publications program, scholarly meetings of its extraordinary membership and a library of rare books and manuscripts. For over 250 years the Society has promoted and disseminated knowledge; in the last few years it has embarked upon an exhibition program that significantly expands the meaning of its mission and the scope of its activities.

Since announcing its exhibition program at the turn of the millennium, the Society has articulated a number of goals. Among them: to expand its public role and audience; to make its important historical collections more accessible; to nurture knowledge and inquiry among audiences of all ages. The exhibition program is conceived by APS as a multi-year building process leading to the establishment of a strong and permanent presence by the Franklin Tercentenary in 2006. In the spring of 2001, after hiring a curatorial staff and refurbishing space, APS opened a public exhibition in its 1789 Philosophical Hall for the first time in 200 years. Its second exhibition: *Stuffing Birds, Pressing Plants, Shaping Knowledge: Natural History in North America, 1730-1860*, was open from June 2003 to December 2004. A larger and more ambitious exhibition than the first, the Society used the 18-month run of the show to introduce and develop its museum education program.

Stuffing Birds, Pressing Plants, Shaping Knowledge highlighted the practice of natural history in North America from 1730-1860. Through specimens, rare scientific texts, drawings, broadsides and other objects, the exhibition explored the methods of studying and representing the natural world in this period and the ways in which those methods shaped contemporary knowledge and world views. The exhibition addressed how categorizing and ordering information shapes our understanding of it; while the focus is on natural history, we may consider the effect of systems of classification adopted by other disciplines. Objects drawn from the collections of the Society and other institutions include megalonyx bones owned by Thomas Jefferson, botanical drawings by William Bartram, botanical specimens from the Lewis and Clark expedition, and animals which resided in Charles Willson Peale’s Museum. A destination for tourists by virtue of its proximity to Independence Hall, the Society has took steps to make this exhibition more accessible to the public, by offering expanded evening hours for Philosophical Hall on the first Friday of every month and working with the Park Service to negotiate security issues while increasing its presence on Independence Mall. Trained guides offered group tours and informal interpretation of the show and a Family Gallery Guide offered activities for young visitors. The Society’s website provided a tour of the exhibition along with links and resources for teachers. During the summer of 2004, APS worked collaboratively with other local museums to add a field station on its grounds for families to explore local animal and plant life.

With *Stuffing Birds*, *Pressing Plants*, *Shaping Knowledge* open to the public, staff at APS concentrated on implementing related educational programming. APS established year-long partnerships with teams of students at several area high schools who used the exhibition as a starting point for independent research projects on environmental science. Other components of the high school program included the opportunity for students to work with an artist-in-residence and to participate in a high school research symposium with local APS members. While focusing its efforts on high school and college students, APS is also working to provide engaging educational programs for younger and older audiences. Young visitors to *Stuffing Birds*, *Pressing Plants*, *Shaping Knowledge* were presented with a magnifying glass and a Family Gallery Guide which encouraged them to explore the exhibition and Independence Park as naturalists, drawing and recording their observations.

The Society is already looking ahead to further development of its exhibition program. APS engaged the Institute for Learning Innovation to undertake an audience study around its current exhibition. The study surveyed the Society's varied audiences, using reaction to *Stuffing Birds* to test the success of educational and presentation strategies. APS has planned two more exhibitions through 2006. With funding from the Heritage Philadelphia Program, the Society is planning for a larger show, timed to coincide with the Franklin Tercentenary. This new exhibit will examine the life of Ekaterina Dashkova—a Russian princess, president of the Russian Academy of Sciences, friend of Benjamin Franklin, and first female member of the Society.

The American Philosophical Society has demonstrated a major commitment to its exhibition and museum education program, dedicating significant resources to its establishment. The Society's goal of serving very different audiences—from tourists and school children to scholars and Nobel laureates—presents special challenges to its curatorial staff. Nonetheless, APS is embracing its new audiences and, in so doing, is reinventing its role in public and intellectual life as it enters a new millennium.