

“GREGOR MENDEL: PLANTING THE SEEDS OF GENETICS”

Exhibition Opens at National Museum of Health and Medicine

WASHINGTON (April 2, 2007) -- The life and work of 19th -century friar Gregor Mendel, a former high school teacher whose experiments were ignored by the scientific community for decades, is featured in “Gregor Mendel: Planting the Seeds of Genetics” on display at the National Museum of Health and Medicine April 28 through Sept. 16, 2007.

For eight years Mendel grew generation after generation of pea plants and carefully observed the results. Over the course of these experiments, Mendel grew an estimated 28,000 pea plants and counted some 300,000 peas.

In 1865, Mendel reported the results of plant hybridizing experiments and laid out the basic laws of inheritance--offering a tentative but insightful sketch of how physical traits are passed from one generation to the next. This ground-breaking work was ignored until the turn of the century, when it was rediscovered and confirmed by other researchers.

Since then, Mendel has come to be recognized as the father of genetics, although the history of how he accomplished that remains relatively unknown today.

The approximately 100-artifact exhibition traces the rise of genetics through its major milestones--from the discovery of chromosomes to the famous DNA model of James Watson and Francis Crick. While very few of Mendel’s papers or personal possessions were kept, his botanical specimens, scientific instruments, photographs, correspondence, original manuscripts, journal, books and gardening tools are on display.

Life-size photo murals of the Abbey library where Mendel studied, the Columbia University Fly Room where Thomas H. Morgan investigated the genetics of fruit flies in the early 1900s and a modern DNA lab illustrate the changes in the scientific environment over the last 150 years.

The exhibition’s “Modern Mendels” provides insight on contemporary scientists who use Mendel’s findings and their knowledge of genetics to learn about the world around them. This research includes applying genetics in crop cultivation; studying origins and ancestry; mapping genomes; and solving new mysteries of heredity.

“Without Mendel’s discoveries, evolutionary biology wouldn’t have its foundation. Although we use more sophisticated tools and analyses, we are still applying Mendel’s ideas to today’s genetic research,” said Kevin Feldheim, manager of The Field Museum’s Pritzker Laboratory for Molecular Systematics and Evolution.

In addition, the exhibition incorporates five videos and ten hands-on interactives to make the fundamentals of genetics accessible to everyone. Visitors can recreate the steps of Mendel’s experiment; identify dominant and recessive traits on themselves; look through a microscope to compare what scientists were able to see at different points in history; and analyze DNA sequences like modern-day scientists.

A highly unusual and innovative feature of this exhibition is the integration of contemporary works of art that explore the subjects of genetics. Featured pieces include artist Susan Derges’ series of photographs entitled “Vessel,” which captures the development of frogs--from eggs to tadpoles to maturity--and Christine Borland’s “A Treasury of Human Inheritance, Entres Case,” a mobile made of polished agate stones representing five generations of the Entres family, which had various symptoms of Huntington Disease. Each agate section is unique in its configuration of crystals and rings, and the overall pattern represents various symptoms of the condition.

“We are excited to be hosting ‘Gregor Mendel: Planting the Seeds of Genetics’ as the first stop on its national tour,” said Adrienne Noe, Ph.D., the museum’s director. “It provides an opportunity for visitors to understand the basics of heredity and the genetics of human disease. It also helps broaden our knowledge of the history surrounding modern evolutionary biology.”

This exhibition and its national tour were developed by The Field Museum, Chicago, in partnership with the Vereinigung zur Förderung der Genomforschung, Vienna, Austria, and The Mendel Museum, Brno, Czech Republic.

The Field Museum was founded in 1893 as the Columbian Museum of Chicago to house the biological and anthropological collections assembled for the World’s Columbian Exhibition. These objects form the core of the museum’s collections, which have grown through world-wide expeditions, exchange, purchase, and gifts to more than 20 million specimens. The museum also houses a world-class natural history library of more than 250,000 volumes.

The Vereinigung zur Förderung der Genomforschung is a charitable society founded in Vienna in 2000 to support genetic research and to encourage constructive dialogue between scientists and members of the public. Its Brno Initiative is to develop part of the Abbey where Gregor Mendel lived and worked as a center for discovery, communication and education--now known as The Mendel Museum.

The exhibition debuted at The Field Museum, Chicago, before embarking on its national tour. After closing at the National Museum of Health and Medicine, its tour will continue to Columbus, Ohio, Memphis, Tenn., and Philadelphia.

The exhibition will be on display at the museum, which is open every day except Dec. 25 from 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. The museum is located at Walter Reed Army Medical Center, 6900 Georgia Avenue and Elder Street, NW, Washington, D.C. For more information call (202) 782-2200 or visit www.nmhm.washingtondc.museum. Admission and parking are free.

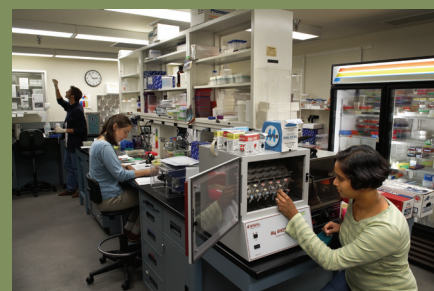
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“A Treasury of Human Inheritance, Entres Case”
Christine Borland, 2001



Field Museum DNA Lab © Field Museum,
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Mendel's Microscope © Stepan Bartos

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