

SCIENCE

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THE MUSEUM OF THINGS VERSUS THE MUSEUM OF IDEAS¹

By Dr. WILLIAM K. GREGORY

AMERICAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY

THERE was once a museum man named G. Browne Goode, who said in effect that a museum should be an exhibit of ideas, set forth by labels and illustrated by well-chosen specimens; but this prophet of a better day has been dead a long time and museums of natural history have been very slow to give his principle a fair trial.

History repeats itself. In the eighteenth century, when the young science of zoology was just beginning to get on its feet, there were two schools of zoologists: the first, reacting against the zoologic myths and fables of the Middle Ages, professed itself as the humble recorder of facts and is therefore referred to as the School of Facts (*L'Ecole des Faits*). A work entitled

¹ Address before the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia, May 25, 1936.

"Memoires pour servir a l'Histoire Naturelle des Animaux," published at the Hague in 1731, was especially noteworthy because it illustrated the status and ideals of natural history in France during the reign of Louis XV. It records the results of a series of dissections performed upon animals from the Jardin du Roi, by a committee of the Royal Academy of Sciences. The work is animated by the spirit of the *"école des faits"* and illustrates both the search for absolute certainty and the reaction against all theory and generalization—tendencies which were characteristic of the science of the period. The authors remind us that natural history had long been burdened with error and overgrown with fanciful speculation. They had proposed to themselves the task of accumulating a body of anatomical facts, each of which was to be

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