



Extant: the duck-billed platypus.

AMNH/R. MICKENS

enter the exhibition by walking under the belly of a model of a 34-million-year-old adult *Indricotherium* — at 18 tonnes, it is the largest land mammal ever found. They are then treated to

a stupendous array of mammalian headgear, such as a cast of a 2.5-metre-long, bendable tusk of the narwhal; some 2-metre-wide moose antlers; the giant fossil jaw of the 14-million-year-old extinct

Platybelodon grangeri — an elephant relative that may have used its platter-like teeth to scoop up swamp grasses; and the curved upper canines of the Indonesian male babirusa pig that stick upwards through its skull.

The exhibition includes plenty of basic biology: all mammals have three bones in the middle ear, some sort of hair, large brains for their body size and females that produce milk for their young. The show also offers a plethora of weird facts: the Shaw's jird, a small African desert rodent, can mate 224 times in 2 hours; the aardvark, or 'earth pig', can dig for and eat

40,000 termites in a night; the bony, armoured shell of a glyptodont — an extinct South American armadillo relative that grew up to 3 metres long — could weigh more than 500 kilograms. A model easily fits three children inside.

A quarter of all living mammal species are now threatened with extinction. Among those that are endangered are some species that have only recently been found, such as the shy saola, *Pseudoryx nghetinhensis*, a beautiful horned ox discovered in 1992 in the wet evergreen forests of Vietnam's Annamite Mountains that is now threatened by road construction and hunting.

And the striped rabbit, *Nesolagus timminsi*, was discovered in 1999 on sale at a food market near the border of Laos and Vietnam. A taxidermized specimen sits at the end of the exhibition and seems a fitting symbol of the fate of so many of its threatened mammal brethren. Unless we protect them, the only place we might be able to see these fascinating animals in future is in a museum, stuffed. ■

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Evolution's influence on art nouveau

Emile Gallé, Nature and Symbolism: Influences from Japan

Georges de La Tour Departmental Museum, Vic-sur-Seille, Moselle, France
Until 30 August 2009

Characterized by sinuous shapes and subtle colours, the glass vases, bowls and other objects made by the nineteenth-century French artist-designer Emile Gallé and his factory are still highly regarded. But his interest in botany and evolution is less well known. An exhibition this summer in Moselle, northeastern France, explores how Gallé's work was influenced by nature and by Japanese art and design. The show is co-curated by scientist François Le Tacon of the French National Institute for Agronomic Research in Nancy, France.

Gallé was one of the founders of art nouveau, an influential art and design movement. He learnt glass-making skills as an apprentice, but after taking over his father's factory in Nancy in 1875, he created designs that were made by its artisan employees. He exploited the sensual properties of glass, using acid etching to form opaque vessels with layered colours and shaped surfaces. His organic designs did not simply borrow from nature — they expressed contemporary thought and politics. Gallé was aware of Dar-

win's work by 1877 and owned a copy of Ernst Haeckel's *Art Forms in Nature* (1899–1904).

Plant, insect and animal motifs were derived from his careful observations, but also held deeper meanings. "Beetles symbolized industriousness; the thistle symbolized Nancy, Lorraine and separation from Germany; the rose symbolized France and the lover," note Jennifer Hawkins Opie in *Art Nouveau 1890–1914* (V&A Publications, 2000). Gallé was also inspired by aquatic flora and fauna, as

shown in nine works incorporating themes such as undulating strands of seaweed and deep sea colours.

Japanese artwork displayed in Europe at the end of the nineteenth century captivated many western artists and designers. Gallé himself owned woodblock prints by Hokusai and others, and he befriended the Japanese botanist Hokkai Takashina after meeting him at a horticultural exhibition in Nancy in 1886. They were both interested in chrysanthemums, a potent symbol in Japan, which Gallé used as a decorative motif. The internally crackled and coloured glass used by Gallé and his artisans, although made in France, was inspired by Japanese watercolours and lacquerware, as well as carved rock crystal and jade from China.

From 1886 until his death in 1904, Gallé investigated evolutionary mechanisms in botany, an interest covered in the exhibition. Displayed, for example, are plates illustrating the orchid *Aceras hircina*, from a paper on polymorphisms in orchids local to Lorraine that Gallé presented at an international botanical congress in Paris in 1900. They underscore how Gallé's biological exactitude and interest in symbolism generated his incomparable designs. ■

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Emile Gallé vase with etched dragonfly.