



## STUDYING AND SAFEGUARDING NATURAL HISTORY: ARGENTINA'S MUSEO DE LA PLATA

FOUNDED IN 1884 IN THE CAPITAL CITY OF THE BUENOS AIRES PROVINCE IN ARGENTINA, MUSEO DE LA PLATA IS A CELEBRATED NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUM. THE MUSEUM IS PART OF THE NATURAL SCIENCES SCHOOL OF THE NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF LA PLATA. IT IS AN IMPORTANT RESEARCH CENTER AND HOUSES NEARLY FOUR MILLION FOSSILS AND RELICS FROM SOUTH AMERICA. WITH TWENTY ROOMS OF PERMANENT EXHIBITIONS IN THE FIELDS OF GEOLOGY, PALEONTOLOGY, BIOLOGY, ANTHROPOLOGY AND ARCHEOLOGY, IT IS COMMITTED TO NOT ONLY STUDYING, BUT ALSO SAFEGUARDING THE NATURAL AND CULTURAL HERITAGE OF ALL PEOPLES.

The Museo de La Plata's vast and multifaceted trajectory mirrors that of its founding director, Francisco Pascasio ("Perito") Moreno (1852-1919), an Argentine naturalist who emerged as a national figure in the late 19th century. Moreno not only helped establish the museum—along with

a sizable donation of fossils and other artifacts recovered during his pioneering expeditions to the Patagonia region. He also played an influential role in Argentine history and politics, such as the 1881 border treaty negotiations between Argentina and Chile, in addition to a host

of other accomplishments, particularly in the field of education.

Today, the Museo de La Plata, which was officially established in 1884, remains one of the oldest and most prestigious natural history museums in the world, and the first of its kind to be built in South America. “It’s a 139-year-old museum that’s located in Argentina, but it’s much more than that,” says Luis Mansur, President of the Francisco Pascasio Moreno Museo de La Plata Foundation.

### FRIENDS OF LA PLATA MUSEUM

The Museo de La Plata Foundation - named in Moreno’s honor - was founded 36 years ago to steward and support the museum’s continued development, in addition to the maintenance and renovation of its neoclassical edifice. The museum is a national landmark that houses nearly four million archival objects, predominantly sourced from Argentina and South America and divided into five categories: Anthropology, Geology, Zoology, Paleontology and Botany.

In July of 2022, the foundation announced a partnership with the King Baudouin Foundation United States (KBFUS)

to form the Amigos del Museo de La Plata (Friends of La Plata Museum), a new fund dedicated to building an international network of supporters “that also serves to establish connections, foster networking, and attract more people to the museum,” explains Mansur.

### AN ICONIC INSTITUTION

Mansur describes the Museo de La Plata as an “iconic part of the city, in a few different ways.” The museum is a popular destination for hundreds of thousands of international and domestic tourists, with a massive permanent exhibition spanning two floors and over 20 exhibition rooms that covers “the evolution of nature, from the formation of the universe to the origin of human beings and their cultures.”

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“When the museum was created by Moreno, it wasn’t just to connect natural sciences and man, but also culture and the arts,” adds Mansur. The museum also holds a certain cultural significance for Argentines, particularly as a rite of passage for young visitors. “It’s a mandatory stop for every school,” says Mansur. “Everyone in the country knows the museum; students of all ages come to visit.”

In addition, the museum enjoys a reputation as a vital research and educational institution within the School of Natural Sciences at the University of La





Plata. The foundation maintains a scholarship fund for undergraduate students. It presents the annual Fernando Lahille Award, named for the renowned French-born Argentine naturalist (1861-1940) in recognition of his legacy as a pioneering educator committed to public scholarship.

### **ENGAGING ALUMNI AND THE DIASPORA**

Since launching its American Friends Fund, the foundation has held and participated in several events such as the annual Festival Argentino in Virginia, in a somewhat grassroots attempt to attract new members. Rogelio Marchetti, who lives in Virginia and chairs the foundation's external affairs, is tasked with outreach for the new fund. The strategy is simple and two-fold. First, identify and then court "the people who feel connected to the research, to the school, or to the care of the cultural heritage housed at the museum," says Marchetti. That could be alumni of the University of La Plata now living abroad, such as Marchetti himself, who see the value in giving back to their university and supporting scholarships that the museum provides to students and researchers alike. "To say thank you by helping another,

that's a bit of the concept of why to give," says Marchetti.

Then, there is also the growing Latin American diaspora - now over 60 million in the U.S.- that may be interested in the museum's broader collection of Latin American artifacts. "Part of it is giving people a sense of pride, that we [Argentines] come from a country that has this institution or that we come from a continent that supports this," says Marchetti. Ultimately, however, the goal is to reach out to all potential stakeholders and keep them informed, engaged, and above all, curious about a one-of-a-kind institution with such a historic and international trajectory.

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### **FROM SUDAN TO ARGENTINA**

Fittingly, one of the museum's donors is an Argentine American physicist, Dr. Elsa Rosenvasser Feher. Her father, historian and Egyptologist Dr. Abraham Rosenvasser, is known for organizing a series of time-sensitive archaeological expeditions to northern Sudan in the early 1960s to help excavate the ancient Temple of Aksha, located on the banks of the River Nile. The impending construction of the Aswan Dam threatened to flood the historic site, thus prompting the Egyptian and Sudanese governments to request international support via UNESCO in 1959. The improbable story of the expeditions led by Dr. Rosenvasser is captured in the award-winning



2022 documentary *De la Nubia a La Plata* (From Sudan to Argentina), directed by Argentine filmmaker Ricardo Preve.

### **A NETWORK OF INTERNATIONAL SOLIDARITY**

In return for this show of international solidarity, a small portion of the recovered artifacts were donated to Argentina. These objects are on display as part of the Museo de La Plata's Egyptian exhibit—the only collection of its kind remaining in the region following the tragic 2018 fire at the National Museum in Brazil. "It's really one of the museum's treasures because of the quality of the objects and the way they are displayed," adds Mansur.

Sadly, Dr. Elsa Rosenvasser Feher, who spent much of her life in California, passed away in the fall of last year. "One of her last projects was to honor her father's achievements, which were known in his time, but have since been a bit forgotten," says Mansur. "It's our obligation to spread this history, to make it known—not just in our country, but outside of it, too." Likewise, the foundation hopes its partnership with KBFUS will allow it to cultivate the international support it needs for the

museum to continue its development and safeguard its future for generations to come, or in Marchetti's words, "to take the leap and get to where we want to go, which is an institution that is recognized around the world." Much like Dr. Rosenvasser and UNESCO's call to action more than sixty years prior, the timing is crucial. "I think this is a moment in which maybe our country, our museum, our foundation could receive that international solidarity from other countries," says Mansur.

<https://www.museo.fcnym.unlp.edu.ar/museo>

<https://kbfus.networkforgood.com/projects/54497-f-kbfus-funds-fundacion-museo-de-la-plata-francisco-pascasio-moreno-ar>

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