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## ***Venenum, un Monde Empoisonné*, Musée des Confluences**

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The Musée des Confluences in Lyon, France, recently organized a remarkable exhibition: *Venenum, un Monde Empoisonné*. It ran from April 2017 to April 2018 and was located in one of the museum's five large temporary exhibition spaces. *Venenum* did justice to the multi-disciplinary and multi-thematic nature of this newly founded museum, bringing together objects otherwise classified separately as natural history, art, ethnography, or history.

Upon entering the first room, the message is clear: this is no ordinary exhibition. Walking down a short dark corridor, the visitor finds herself in a small, dimly lit room, with a white station supporting an apple on top of a stick. A narrator speaking first in French then in English reminds the visitor of the rules of engagement: "In this museum, there is no touching—starting with this apple." "Temptation? Provocation? If at any point you feel phobic," reminds the narrator, "you are free to turn back and leave the exhibition." This introductory room sets the tone for a museum visit where a combination of traditional museography, the use of live specimens, and interactive elements create a unique atmosphere.

The first part of the exhibition presents the history of Western engagements with poison from classical antiquity to the present time. Characterizing poison as "the most subtle and most unpredictable" of weapons, the exhibition features artworks that illustrate key moments in mythology and history in which poison played a central role. The visitor learns about poison in the twelve labors of Hercules, in the death of Cleopatra, Italian Renaissance alchemists' experimentations, the spread and fear of poison in early modern France, and the use of poison as a chemical weapon in the modern era. This first gallery is traditional in its organization. It displays, in a chronological sequence, sculptures, paintings, prints, books, as well as some objects, such as a gas mask, all of which are accompanied by explanatory labels but no interactive elements.

The transition from the first to the second part of the exhibition is well designed. After having had an introduction to the history of poison—which, in other museums, would have been the focus of the entire exhibition itself—the visitor is offered an encounter with poisonous and venomous animals, plants, and minerals in all their forms. Aquariums with live fish, frogs, and snakes are presented side-by-side with poisonous animals preserved in jars, skeletons of snakes, and collections of butterflies, snails, and rocks. Tablets with touchscreens bring information about the poisonous properties of bacteria, microalgae, and fungi invisible to the naked eye, as well as about the public health pandemics that they caused in the past. A beautiful showcase displays a selection of mollusks organized in the form of a chemical compound, highlighting their venomous substances. Such a great variety of specimens on show—most of them coming from the museum's own collection—allows the visitor to vividly experience feelings of fear and wonder.

The next section addresses the uses of poison. Large panels with reproductions of natural history illustrations draw attention to the plants from which toxins are extracted for human use. Unlike the first part of the exhibition, which centers on a purely Western engagement with poison, this section instead is organized around *practices* and *products* that can be equally found in Europe, the Americas, Africa, Asia, and Oceania without any separation between regions or



times nor any exoticization of cultural practices (the Amazonian *curare*, for instance, stands right next to arsenic and polonium). Aside from the understandable occasional references to species that exist in the region of Lyon or in France, there is no emphasis on national particularities, turning visitors' attention instead toward global approaches to poison throughout time.

The exhibition ends with a reference to early modern and modern apothecaries, the invention of legal toxicology, and the production of medicines by the pharmaceutical industry. It highlights the ambiguity of poison, which, as mentioned in the introduction, can be lethal and life-saving. Toward the exit of the exhibition, the visitor finds a cabinet with a selection of drugs and a question for the future: "Will toxins contribute to saving more lives than they have taken?" By posing this question, the museum calls attention to the responsibility for and the uses of advancing scientific knowledge on toxins. In this sense, it is a pity that the contribution of scientists to the making of this exhibition is placed in a somewhat secluded section of the room behind a large panel that works as a wall separating the main exhibition from the video interviews with these experts. Perhaps it was the designers' intention to leave the work of curators and consultants literally behind the scenes, but yet have it available. Likewise, an accompanying catalogue would have been a great addition to this exhibition. Despite such minor imperfections, *Venenum* is to be praised as an original, informative, and captivating exhibition.

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